

## Hebrews 9:23-28 “The Judgement Sermon”

One of the most important things I've learned in 35 years of following Jesus and 22 years of ordained ministry: You can count on Jesus to keep his promises. Jesus promised his followers three things – 1.) Their lives would not be easy. 2.) They would never be alone. 3.) In the end, it will be all right. Sounds about like every other Bob Marley song, right Kevin? But let's face it -- Everything is *not* all right! Far from it in fact. Which begs the question: “How does God get us from here to there?” How does God *put* things right? I'm going to say something that's going to sound strange coming from me as we attempt to answer this question. Whenever the Bible talks about how God puts things right, the word that's used is “judgement.” Judgement? Yes. Unfortunately our understanding of that word is almost always negative. Why? Because when we hear that word, we think of a judge in our culture's court system. We understand “judgement” to mean nothing more than condemnation and punishment. But in biblical times, good judges like Gideon, Deborah, Ehud and even Samson did a lot more than condemn or punish. They worked to set things right. They worked to restore balance and harmony and well-being. Their justice was restorative, not just punitive. The ultimate goal of judgement was to either restrict or convert all that was evil so that good would be able to run free.

Now ... does that kind of justice always happen? No. We rarely see this kind of justice play out in real life. So people of faith -- Christians especially -- have come to the conclusion that the *only* way this sort of restorative justice can happen is after death. And there's plenty of scripture to back this one up too, especially in the books of 1 Peter and 2 Timothy when the authors say that “God (or Christ in Timothy's case) will *judge* the living and the dead.” And so because of this idea of a final judgement at the end of life, we

sometimes hope and pray that a higher power who is above and beyond this earthly life will come along and have the last word. Our imaginations run wild as we come up with all sorts of creative possibilities of what it will look like for anyone who has ever wronged us and got away with it -- “Oh, she’ll get what’s coming to her in the end.” Or, “He’ll pay for all the evil he’s done on earth when he faces God on judgement day. Mmm-hmmm!” It’s how we reconcile our frustration when we think that there is no justice here on earth while we’re alive.

But the Biblical understanding of final judgement, or final restoration, means that God’s universe arcs toward universal repentance, universal reconciliation, universal purification and a universal “righting of wrongs.” It means more than saying that “everything that can be punished will be punished.” It means that everything that can be *restored* will be *restored*. It means that disease will be treated and healed, not just diagnosed. It means that everything will, in God’s ultimate justice, not only be evaluated: It will be given *new* value.

So when we say, with the writer of Hebrews, that “it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that judgement,” we’re not saying, “And after this, condemnation.” We’re saying, “After this, there’s setting things right.” Being in God’s *light* will remove us from *darkness*.”

1<sup>st</sup> John 3:1-3 says,

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All

who have this hope in them purify themselves just as God is pure.

Since “what we will be has not yet been made known,” then it’s hard to say anything more, except this: In the end, God will be all in all, and all will be well. Or to quote Bob Marley, “Every little thing is gonna be alright.”

Well that sounds downright fluffy preacher. Does that mean that there will be no cost, no loss, no regret, no mourning? See, this is where the image of fire comes in handy. And I’m not talking about the way “hellfire and brimstone preachers” use it either. If you ask them, they’ll tell you that fire is an instrument of torture. But when you study the scriptures, you’ll find way more examples of fire being an instrument of *purification*. Paul describes it this way in 1 Corinthians 3 –

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be *saved*, but only as through fire.

God’s purifying fire *cannot* destroy that which is good. The cleansing, refining fire of God can only destroy the “wood, hay, and stubble” of hypocrisy, evil, and sin. So if some of us have constructed our lives using worthless building materials, there won’t be much of our life’s story left after the fire. We will still experience the purification of judgement as pain, loss, regret, and remorse. Maybe we thought we were pretty smart, powerful,

superior or successful, but the purifying fire will *surprise* us with the truth. In contrast, some of us who didn't think there was really anything special about us will be surprised in a positive way. Thousands of deeds of kindness that we had long forgotten will have been remembered by God, and we will feel the reward of God saying, "Welcome into my joy."

*This* understanding of God's *restorative* judgement should be that which changes the way you live before death. And I'm not talking about the kind of judgement that makes us "fear God's punishing fire" either. I'm not talking the, "Oh my lordy, I better be good or I'm gonna burn in hell" sort of judgement. That's just cheap, lazy and ... *insincere*. No, what I'm talking about is *restorative* judgement. Because understanding God's judgement as *restorative* makes you *eager* to use your wealth to make others rich rather than hoarding it all yourself. It *inspires* you to use your power to empower others, not to advance yourself. It *liberates* you to give and give so that you will finish this life having given more than you received. It *encourages* you to try to be sly, sneaky and secretive about your good deeds because you'd rather "pay it forward" than take the credit yourself. In fact, this hope make you willing to give up this life, if necessary, for things that matter more than survival.

And this hope also changes the way we see trials and difficulties in this life. If we give up seeing trials and difficulties as *punishment for our wrongs* and start seeing them as a refining fire to *strengthen and purify us*, all of a sudden trials and tribulations start becoming our *friends* instead of our *enemies*. Looking at it this way helps us see this refining fire as one that burns away our impatience.

Annoyances become like flames that burn away our selfishness. The demands of duty are like degrees of heat that burn away our laziness. The unkind words and deeds of others are like a furnace in which our character is tempted, until we learn to bless, not curse, in

response. It's not even worth comparing our short-term trials to the long-term glory that comes from enduring them. Whatever we face – ease or struggle, life or death, Paul's encouragement is the same. 1 Corinthians 15:58 he says, "Therefore my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is *not in vain*."

If we believe in judgement – in God's great "setting things right," we won't live in fear. We'll keep standing strong with a steadfast, immovable determination, and we'll keep excelling in God's good work in our world. If we believe the universe moves toward purification, justice, and peace, we'll keep seeking to be pure, just, and peaceable now. If we believe God is pure light and goodness, we'll keep moving toward the light each day in this life. Then, someday, when our time on earth comes to a close, we will trust ourselves to the loving Light in which we will awaken – purified and beloved forever.

Until then, the Spirit leads us along in that arc toward restoration and healing. Like a mother in childbirth, groaning with pain and anticipation, the Spirit groans within us. The Spirit will not rest until all is made whole and all is made holy and all is made well. Life will not be easy. We will never be alone. In the end all will be well. That is all we know, and all we *need* to know.