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Judgment and Salvation

An Exposition of John 12 : 31-32

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THERE are three ways in which Christians have attempted to relate the concept of judgment to God's purpose of salvation. There are those who, starting from the doctrine of election, have asserted that God means to save some and not others, and that the identity of the saved depends entirely on the free, unconditioned choice or predestination of God. All have sinned and come under God's judgment, all have deserved condemnation. But God in his unfathomable mercy has decreed that some shall escape the fate they have earned. There are those who, emphasizing man's freedom, have declared that God means to save as many as will respond to his offer of salvation and that men are judged and their destinies determined by the response which they make to God's offer. And there are those who have said that God intends to save all men and that he is able to carry out his intentions. Whatever judgment may involve, it does not involve a distinction between eternal bliss and eternal penalty.

Each of these three views, taken separately, can be defended on the ground that it enshrines a genuine insight into the nature and ways of God. But each is also open to devastating criticism. The first view preserves the vital tenet of sound Christianity that salvation is entirely the gift of God and in no sense man's achievement; but it raises a serious moral problem concerning the character of God, since if God is able to save and declines to do so it is difficult to regard him as utter goodness. The second view compels us to take seriously our moral choices, but in the last resort makes salvation to depend on man and not on God. The third view does justice to the belief that God is both loving and almighty, but apparently at the cost of ignoring sin and presuming on God's grace.

The New Testament avoids these criticisms by not taking the three views separately. There is ample Scriptural evidence in favour of all three. In particular there are sayings in the Fourth Gospel which could be quoted in support of each of them. There are passages to delight the heart of a Calvinist. "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (6:44). "He who is of God hears the words of God; the reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God" (8:47). "You do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice . . . and no one shall snatch them out of my hand" (10:26-28). "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (15:16). There are many more passages in which response to the Gospel determines man's destiny. "He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already,

because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (3:18). "This is the work of God that you believe in him whom he has sent" (6:28). "He who rejects me and does not receive my sayings has a judge; the word that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day" (12:48). But there are also passages in which Jesus is set forth as the Saviour of all. "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (1:29). "God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (3:17). "We know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world" (4:42).

Is John an inconsistent thinker, trying to get the best of three incompatible points of view? Does he abandon hope of understanding in a triple paradox? Or do election, saving faith, and universal salvation all represent different aspects of the one truth of God's purpose as John saw it?

By the canons of logic the three views seem to be mutually exclusive. But there is a fair measure of agreement among theologians today that the first two views, the view which emphasizes divine grace and the view which emphasizes human responsibility, in spite of their apparent contradiction, can and must be held together in tension. But what of the third view, the universalism which since the time of Origen has been almost universally condemned as heresy? Between this and the other two there would seem to be irreconcilable conflict. Either there is a judgment which sends some to heaven and some to hell, or God will save all and bring all to heaven.

The fourth evangelist, however, is not content to leave the matter so, but insists that this contradiction too shall be transcended. "Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the prince of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (12:31-32). That is to say, in the Cross world judgment becomes identical with universal salvation. Let us be quite clear about the magnitude of John's assertion. It would be simple to say and simple even to believe that in the cross judgment and salvation coincide in such a way that he who will not have Christ for his Saviour must have him for his Judge, that Christ crucified saves those who believe and judges those who do not. But John is making a much more staggering assertion, that in the cross all men alike confront the salvation that judges and the judgment that saves.

If this collocation of ideas cuts across our habitual cast of thought, perhaps the reason is that we have brought to the Fourth Gospel preconceived notions drawn from other sources instead of allowing the Gospel to speak for itself. One of the distinctive characteristics of this Gospel is that it takes one familiar theological term after another and transforms its meaning in the light of the revelation of God in Christ. Many of these terms—Son of God, word, life, truth, way, light, glory, etc.—are commonly known as Christological terms, the implication being that we have only to trace the source and history of John's vocabulary to throw a flood of light on the mystery of Christ's person. John's actual intention is precisely the opposite of this, for to him the known quantity is Christ from whom men must learn

the nature of life, of truth, of God himself. "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. . . . He that has seen me has seen the Father" (14:6, 9).

This revaluation of words is particularly clear in the case of the word *glory*. Jesus is accused by the Jews of arrogating to himself a glory to which he has no claim (5:41-44; 7:14-18). He replies that his accusers are judging him by themselves. The only glory which they understand or desire is the worldly authority which wins the recognition and approbation of men. He is devoid of any such ambition. The only glory he seeks is that of filial obedience to the Father who sent him. Humanly speaking, it is through this utter obedience to God's redemptive purpose that Jesus is able to enter into perfect unity with the Father, and this unity constitutes his true glory. All through his life Jesus displays this glory, "glory as of the only Son from the Father," and it leads him in the end to the cross. So completely are the ideas of glory and humble obedience fused in John's mind that he frequently describes the crucifixion as the glorifying of Christ. Elsewhere in the New Testament the suffering of the cross is represented as the path which Christ must tread in order to enter the glory of the Resurrection and Ascension (e.g. Lk. 24:26). But here in the Fourth Gospel the cross itself is the glory. John can conceive no glory more ultimate than the glory of redemptive love.

With this example before us we approach John's vocabulary with a new caution, suspecting that other old bottles have similarly been stretched to bursting point by being filled with new wine. Can it be that judgment is another word which John has filled with new meaning?

Let us then, setting aside preconceived theories, retrace our steps and ask what John has to tell us about the purpose of God and the part which judgment has to play in it. This is, after all, the main theme of the Gospel which tells us how the Logos—the eternal purpose of God—entered the world in human form. One of the first things that John tells us about this purpose is that the world was not able to grasp it until it was revealed by the Only-begotten Son. But here at the outset we must be on our guard against two possible misinterpretations of John's Gospel. It would be a mistake to think that, because in the Prologue John speaks of the Son revealing the Father, he regards the Incarnation simply as the unveiling of a divine secret. The Incarnation means not only the disclosure but the accomplishment of God's purpose. Jesus comes to utter the words of God but also to do his works. But it would also be wrong to suppose that the Incarnation was to John just the means whereby God's purpose is revealed and achieved. Christ is himself the incarnate purpose of God. In him we see revealed and achieved God's purpose to take manhood up into unity with himself. In the Gospel this theme is developed in three stages. First we see the man Jesus living in unity with God. Then in the cross Jesus identifies himself with all mankind, so as to bring them into the same unity with God. And finally Jesus predicts that this bringing of the world to God will be worked out in the mission of the church.

The first part of the Gospel is largely concerned to demonstrate that the

man Jesus is one with the Father, and to evoke from men the belief that he is the emissary of God's salvation. He manifests his glory and his disciples believe in him (2:11). His healing miracles show that "as the Father has life in himself so he has given to the Son to have life in himself" (5:26). The works which he does reveal "that the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (10:39). "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?" (14:10). "The word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me" (14:24). "I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (15:10). "All that the Father has is mine" (16:15). "I and the Father are one" (10:30).

These are but a handful of passages taken at random from the many in which John seeks to show that throughout his life Jesus lives in the bosom of the Father. But the divine purpose is not exhausted by the taking up of one man into unity with the Godhead. It is God's will that he should prepare a place for others, that where he is there they may be also (14:3). But between other men and Jesus there is a great gulf. They are sinners; he is without sin. John has to face not only the fact of sin which disqualifies men for the union with God to which they are called but also the tragic fact that the coming of Jesus produced the opposite result to that which God intended. "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (3:17-19). There were some indeed who came to the light and believed in Jesus at first; but the many deserted him (6:66), and the few who remained had a faith that was not yet faith. "Do you now believe? The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, every man to his own home, and will leave me alone; yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me" (16:32). Thus the first stage of God's unfolding purpose leaves Jesus alone with the Father who sent him.

The second stage of God's plan of redemption is the overcoming of this solitariness of Christ, this judgment of separation from those he wills to save. If they cannot be joined to him where he is, in the bosom of the Father, he can be joined to them where they are, under the judgment of God and in the death which is the wages of sin. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (12:24). In some forms of eastern theology it is said that the Son of God, in becoming man, embraced all mankind, so that when he returned to the Father he carried with him not merely his own individual manhood but humanity, indissolubly united with him by a common participation in the body of flesh. John may have had some such idea in mind when he said that the Word became flesh, but in his Gospel it is more particularly in the Cross that Jesus is united with mankind. He identifies himself with them in their sin and accepts for himself their condemnation and death.

“Now is the judgment.” The whole life of Jesus had been a judgment, but that judgment reached its climax in the Cross before which the whole world stood condemned. If the world had been left alone to face its condemnation, the judgment of the world would have been the triumph of Satan, the prince of this world. As Tempter he would have succeeded to the uttermost; as the Great Accuser he would have won his case; as Destroyer he would have been free to claim his own. But because Jesus identified himself with the accused, the Cross became the defeat of Satan and the point where all men, released from Satan’s power, were drawn into unity with Jesus, and therefore into unity with the Father.

When the Johannine Christ says “I will draw all men to myself,” he is speaking of the cross, an event which to him was future but which to us is past. In recording this saying, therefore, John is not claiming that Christ *will* save everybody but that he *has* saved everybody. He *is* the Saviour of the world, and his last word from the cross—“It is finished”—indicates the completion and the finality of his task. Henceforth neither death nor Satan can separate men from Christ; though they descend into hell he is there.

The world has been saved; but John has made it abundantly clear that salvation is a personal relationship, which on its human side means belief in Jesus and through him knowledge of the God who loves and saves. He has no doubt that the cross, which has effectively drawn all men into unity with Christ, has also a continuing power to lead all men into a saving knowledge of God and to transform into faith even the sin which caused them to repudiate the Gospel. “When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority but speak thus as the Father taught me” (8:28). The process whereby the Cross evokes a saving faith constitutes the third and final stage in God’s plan of redemption and comes into operation through the dual witness of the disciples and the Holy Spirit.

In his consecration prayer Jesus sets out in detail the threefold missionary programme which is to follow as the result of his death and exaltation. First he prays for the inner circle of his disciples, those who have known him and believed in him, that they may be drawn into the same unity which he has had with the Father. Then he prays for the church that is to be, the wider circle of those who, not having seen, are to believe through the witness of the disciples. Finally he prays that the unity of the church with himself and with the Father may be so manifest “that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me” (17:23)—and this knowledge he has already declared to be eternal life.

Alongside the witness of the disciples John places the concurrent witness of the Holy Spirit. It is the function of the disciples to testify to that which they have seen and heard. It is the function of the Holy Spirit to bring home to the consciences of men the significance of the life, death, and exaltation of Jesus. “When he comes, he will convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment; of sin, because they do not believe in me;

of righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more; of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged (16:8-10). In other words, the Spirit will confront all men with the Cross, will convince them that in it their sin is condemned and the righteousness of Jesus vindicated, and will bring them to that judgment in which Jesus casts out Satan by bearing the world's sin that the world may share his righteousness.

John does not pretend that the task of the disciples will be an easy one. The world has hated their master and it will hate them also (15:18-20). But Christ has overcome the world by a love which was prepared to accept the world's judgment, and the disciples are summoned to abide in this same redemptive love (15:10). As he by his death has borne much fruit, so they too must bear much fruit (15:8). As on the Cross he glorified the Father, so Peter by his death will glorify God (21:19). C. F. D. Moule has recently drawn our attention to the aspect of judgment in the two Gospel sacraments.¹ As Christ at his Baptism identified himself with sinners and accepted for himself the judgment on sin which he was to endure on the cross, so for the Christian baptism is an initiation into the death of Christ, a once-for-all acceptance of God's judgment on his sin; and the Lord's Supper is the regular renewal of this communion in the death of Christ. John seems to require that we should carry this argument one stage further. For he who abides in Christ's love, the love which led him to the cross, must accept not merely God's judgment on his own individual sin, but God's judgment also on the corporate sin of the world. The Christian cannot be content with the individualism of Ezekiel's watchman—"Thou hast delivered thy soul"; has not Christ warned us that he who would save his soul shall lose it? The proper models for the Christian are rather Moses praying to be blotted out of the book of life if Israel could not be forgiven (Exod. 32:32), Paul wishing to be cut off from Christ for the sake of his brethren, his kinsmen according to the flesh (Rom. 9:3), and Judah, foreshadowing the Gospel with his words to Joseph, "How can I go back to my father if the lad is not with me?" (Gen. 44:34). These prayers and the prayer of Christ himself for the world's salvation find a modern echo in the hymn of G. K. Chesterton:

Tie in a living tether
The prince and priest and thrall!
Bind all our lives together,
Smite us and and save us all!²

John's doctrine does not solve all our problems. We are left asking, for example, how far the present state of the world justifies us in still claiming that Christ is the Saviour of the world and the Holy Spirit the convincer of the world's conscience.³ But John does enable us to avoid the criticisms which have always been levelled against universalism. The universalist has

1. "The Judgment theme in the Sacraments" in *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology*, ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daub, pp. 464-481.

2. From *O God of earth and altar*.

3. See N. Micklem, *Ultimate Questions*, pp. 112-136.

been accused of treating sin too lightly, of taking arrogantly for granted that which is but an incomprehensible divine possibility, of failing to give to man's moral choices an eternal significance. Taught by John we can reply to these charges. Can one who takes the cross seriously be said to think lightly of sin? Is one who has entered into the fellowship of Christ's suffering to be called arrogant if he enters also into the confidence of Christ's triumph? And if the consequences of our choices are seen in the cross, are they not with the cross taken up into the eternal order?

For John the eschatological events of the Last Day are so completely present in the person of Jesus that he has little to say about any final crisis. He never discusses whether or not all men will in the end be saved. But he does say that God intends the salvation of all, that God's work of universal salvation has been accomplished once-for-all by Christ on Calvary, that Christians ought to abide in his love and not to be content with anything less than love's total victory, that the final judgment will not be different in character from the judgment of the cross by which the prince of this world has been cast out and all men drawn, in fact if not yet in faith, into unity with the Crucified.