

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 4

God (Part 3)

If you had asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would have answered, “One of three things. Either a trial lawyer, a preacher, or a politician.” By the grace of God, my calling, at this point in my life, seems to be a lawyer and a Sunday School teacher. I love my job. I get to help people whose lives have been wrecked and destroyed. An interesting aspect of the job involves an intersection between the courtroom and politics. It comes about in Texas where we elect our judges.

I had a case where I represented a widow and young boy whose father/husband had been burned alive in a very tragic day at work. The case came about because the people who had brought the man out to help control a fire at an oil well did not want to take the time to get the necessary safety measures in place. They were supposed to supply water and certain safety equipment, but once my man showed up, the safety measures were still a few days away. The company insisted that my man work on the well to extinguish the fire anyway, threatening to remove him and his company from the job and bring on someone else. At the insistence of his bosses and the company, my man went to work on the fire. There was a subsequent explosion, and without water to contain it, my man was burned alive trying to run for his life.¹

I brought suit on behalf of the widow and son. In our legal process, there are ways that parties are encouraged to settle their disputes without having to go all the way through a trial. One of these is called “mediation.” In mediation, each side presents their best arguments to the other side and then the mediator, a neutral, shuttles back and forth between the parties relaying ideas and settlement discussions with a goal of finding peace and resolution at the end of the day.

We went into mediation in our case hopeful for a good result. I made our case as forcefully as I could. I explained the fault of the defendant companies as well as the extent of the damages. I urged the insurance company to pay as due and urged the company to pay their deductible so that we could resolve the case. When I was finished, it was the defense attorneys’ turn.

¹ Because I am bound by an agreement of confidentiality in most cases, I have modified the facts slightly by combining elements from two different cases.

They stood before my widow and me and said, “Mr. Lanier may be right. This may very well be our fault. In fact, we expect a jury will vote against us. We also understand the tragic nature of the damages. We understand the debt we owe. BUT,” and he said this with emphasis and a bit of arrogance in his voice, “***We own the appeals courts.*** We have funded their elections and they will not vote against an insurance company or a corporation in favor of a victim, even if you are right. So, we will not be paying what we owe, regardless of what you or a jury says. And if you are smart, you will take our offer today.”

So much for justice for all ... But that is NOT the kind of judge that Paul understands God to be. It is not the kind of justice that God practices. His justice is not for sale; he is not swayed by the powerful; he does not need to be re-elected.

This week, we turn to consider Paul’s theology on God as Judge as we examine Paul on God – Part 3.

GOD THE JUDGE

In Romans 2:16, Paul wrote of a “day when, according to my gospel, God **judges** the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.” Repeatedly in Romans and throughout Paul’s writings, Paul makes references to God as judge and to God’s judgments. In the midst of our discussions of anthropomorphisms,² we consider this concept of Paul’s this week.

When Paul writes of God as “Judge” and when he uses related words like “judgment,” Paul is using “legal” terminology.³ In other words, Paul wrote using the same words for “judge” and “judgment” that would have been used in writing of the court system.⁴ While we can comfortably say that Paul is using legal terminology, we need to ask what Paul means when he does so. It is not so simple as saying that Paul is using words of court. If one goes into an American court, one typically finds a judge wearing a black robe sitting elevated above the jury, the lawyers, and even the witness in symbolism of the judge rising above the law. Yet, above the judge is typically an American flag signifying that even the judge exists under the scope of the law. If, instead, one travels to a court in England, one will see a judge wearing a powdered wig as well as robes. The judges in

² Over the last two weeks, we have discussed the way God has revealed himself through scripture in human terms and human life roles (“anthropomorphisms”). Those earlier lessons are available for downloading at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

³ They are built off the Greek word *krino* (κρίνω).

⁴ These words used about God are the same words Paul used in 1 Corinthians 6 when he explained that the church should not take their grievances against each other to a secular court. The church, not judges outside the church, should decide the churches matters.

England carry a different appearance and a different power than the judges in American courts.

The Roman legal system was also different from ours today. By the same token, the Jewish legal system differed from both the Roman system and ours as well. From a judicial perspective, we have some work to do to understand what Paul's theology is in this area. Even more significantly, however, we find that there was a specific usage of Paul's chosen Greek legal words in the context of God as Judge in the Greek version of the Old Testament scriptures. By training, Paul was not a lawyer; he was a trained Old Testament scholar!⁵

So as we study Paul's teaching on God as Judge, we begin with a focus on the Old Testament concept of God as Judge.

GOD THE JUDGE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Reading the Old Testament, we find many references to God as Judge. God judges Israel as a nation (Hos. 4; Isa. 1:2, 18-20); God judges pagan nations (Jud. 11:27; Dt. 33; 21); and God judges individuals (Gen. 18:25). While a full study of God as Judge in the Old Testament is beyond the scope of this class, we do well to realize two aspects of the Old Testament teaching Paul was no doubt intimately familiar with. In doing so, we will be analyzing passages that use a set of related Hebrew words that Jewish translators set into the Greek Old Testament of Paul's day with the same Greek word Paul used in his own writings.⁶ For clarity's sake in this lesson, we will simply refer to that as the Old Testament word for judge (although some other words are also used in lesser frequency).

What does the Old Testament mean when it refers to God as a Judge? The Hebrew word conveys two real aspects to God as Judge. The **word refers to one who is a ruler as well as a judge**. This makes sense in reference to God because God, as Ruler and true King of Israel, held the power of Judge.

God's role here comes into clear definition on Mount Sinai. It is on Sinai that the people chose to enter into a covenant with Yahweh. Yahweh is to be their God and ruler, and they are to be his people. In this legal relationship, God sets out the terms of the relationship. He legislates the "Thou shalt's" and the "Thou shalt not's" that the people agree to follow.

⁵ See the lessons on the life of Paul, specifically lesson 4 at www.biblical-literacy.com.

⁶ Paul most commonly quoted as a reference this Greek translation of scriptures called the "Septuagint." For background on this translation, consider various lessons within our Church History class found at www.Biblical-Literacy.com, specifically Church History Literacy lesson 11. The Hebrew words stem from the Hebrew root *shapat* (שפט).

The thrust of the Old Testament idea is that God works to “restore the legal relationship which has been disrupted by the injury done to one of the partners.”⁷

Now if we fast-forward to today, a prominent law professor from the west coast came to my office recently. A smoking cessation group had approached him. The group was convinced that a prominent Internet company was doing subliminal advertising for cigarettes on the Internet. They were requesting that I file a lawsuit on their behalf. I examined the facts and concluded that they were, in my estimation, probably correct. I then looked at the law, and while subliminal advertising is illegal, the smoking cessation group did not have a right under the law to bring such a suit. I informed them of this, and tried to work with them to get the alleged advertising stopped outside of the court system. If I had brought that case, a fair judge would have looked at the law, and thrown my case out of the courthouse! The case would not stand up under the law the judge is sworn to uphold.

This brings up the questions, on what basis does God judge? As Judge, what are the laws God uses to inform his decisions? What is God’s criterion of justice? The Old Testament gives various answers to these questions because there are many facets to God’s judgments:

- Paul would have understood **God’s judgments separated out good and evil**. For example, in 1 Kings 3:9, Solomon prays for a heart that rightly judges by God’s standards (the ESV translates this as “an understanding mind to govern your people”). This is judging in ways that “discern between good and evil.” Conversely, in Micah 3:1, the prophet notes that those who do not know “justice” are those who “hate the good and love the evil.”
- God’s **judgments seek to level the playing field**. Luke uses a consortium of verses from Isaiah and Zechariah to this effect, “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God (Lk 2:5-6).
- God **judges in ways that brought the proud down, but lifted the humble**. In this vein, the “LORD who practices justice” [from the Hebrew for “judge”] emphasizes that the rich should not boast in riches nor the wise in wisdom (Jer. 9:23-24). Similarly, in Isaiah 5:15-16, we read that the

⁷ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, (Eerdmans 1965) vol. 3 at 923.

- God **champions the cause of the needy and downtrodden** as judge. God's prophets repeatedly implore the people on God's behalf to "bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (Isa. 1:17; see also, Isa. 10:2, Am. 5:11, 15; 8:4ff. etc.).
- God as **Judge is interested in social justice** on earth. There is insistence from God that "You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in his lawsuit" (Ex. 23:6). In Deuteronomy, the Law goes further, "You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge" (Deut. 24:17).
- God **exercises his judgment while at the same time maintaining his faithfulness to the covenant and his own righteousness**. These same requirements God puts on his people. Micah sets it out in 6:8, "what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness [the Hebrew here is *chesed*, it refers to a kindness toward or loyalty to the covenant between God and his people], and to walk humbly with your God."
- God **exercises his justice faithfully and consistently**. As Paul knew from Deuteronomy 32:4, "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he."

PAUL ON GOD AS JUDGE

Of course, it does not take a rocket scientist to understand that people are in a difficult position by virtue of God's principles and standards of consistent judgment. The people cannot keep the covenant faithfully. As the Psalmist saw, "The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one" (Ps 14:2-3). Paul understood this problem before God the judge. Paul quotes this Psalm just after setting out the very principles of God's judgment that Paul knew from his Old Testament studies. In Paul's words, there is a day "when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury" (Rom. 2:5-8).

As Paul recognized, we have a predicament in the Old Testament. God the Judge, with his criterion of judging fairly on a well-established covenant, is to make right what is wrong. That covenant is truly violated by all humanity, and the result warranted is punishment and wrath. As Isaiah put it:

For our transgressions are multiplied before you, and our sins testify against us; for our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities: transgressing and denying the LORD, and turning back from following our God, speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the heart lying words...The LORD saw it, and it displeased him...According to their deeds, so will he repay. (Isa. 59:12-18)

Yet, God displays covenant loyalty and kindness, even in the midst of righteous judgment! Even in the Isaiah passage noted above, it is followed by the promise that “A Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from the transgression,” declares the LORD” (Isa. 59:20). So, God has justice that brings wrath out of covenant violation, yet God the consistent Judge offers a time of repentance and restoration to his covenant people. We see an apparent contradiction in the Old Testament and it cries for an explanation from the consistent LORD! Paul resolved this apparent contradiction as he understood the work of Christ in setting out a new and different covenant relation.

God the judge offers a second basis for judgment beyond the initial covenant on Sinai. This is a covenant based on faith rather than action. This is a covenant where righteousness is not found in following the dictates of the Torah Law, but rather by trusting in a redemptive sacrifice by Jesus as Messiah. Paul explains this in Romans 3:21:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Paul importantly understood this not only as the way that God the Judge could allow the church into fellowship in spite of each person’s sins, but it was also more. This was Paul’s resolution to how God could accept Israelites who set their faith into God even before the sacrifice of Christ. The way that God could accept the faithful before Jesus’ deed on Calvary was centered on that sacrifice yet to occur. Christ’s atonement resolves the apparent contradiction of how God could be consistent as a Judge, consistent in righteousness, and yet embrace a sinful people. As Paul put it, “Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show **God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins**” (Rom. 3:24-25).

We see in Paul, a theology of God as Judge that embraces the Old Testament role of God as Judge of the covenant people in a way that brings consistent fulfillment

to God's actions in Old Testament times as well as an explanation of the covenant of faith by which all people may have fellowship with God.

Where does that leave Paul on the issues of God as Judge in earthly matters beyond the covenant of fellowship between God and his people? Paul fully embraces the roles of God as Judge given in his Old Testament studies. We are not surprised to find Paul teaching of God as:

- A judge who **understands and separates out good and evil**. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians of God as “God who tests our hearts” (1 Thes. 2:4). God discerns good and evil. Simply because his people are justified in an eternal sense does not remove God's concerns or his eye on the morality of actions and thoughts.
- A judge who **seeks to level the playing field**. God reminded the Thessalonians of this as he wrote that, “God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us” (2 Thes. 1:6-7).
- A judge who **brings down the proud, but lifts the humble**. Over and over in his writings Paul urged people to walk in humility (“with all humility and gentleness” – Eph. 4:2; “in humility count others as more significant than yourselves” – Phil. 2:3; “Put on then ... humility” – Col. 3:12).
- A judge who **champions the cause of the needy and downtrodden**. Paul writes the Corinthians at a time where some of the wealthier Corinthians apparently judged Paul on the lack of money, as if he must not have God's fullest blessings. Paul tells the Corinthians “It is a very small thing that I should be judged by you...It is the Lord who judges me” (1 Cor. 4:3-4). Paul continues to address these issues by referencing (and likely quoting) these wealthy Corinthians in their claims, “Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings!” whereas Paul was evidently “like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men.” Yet, Paul closes this thought reminding the Corinthians that Paul was the one who had God's power. Paul walked in God's kingdom that was one of power, in spite of the earthly appearance of poverty. (1 Cor. 4:8-21)
- A Judge **who is interested in social justice** on earth. Paul's entire letter to Philemon is one where Paul sets out the proper treatment a Christian owner should have towards his slave. Much like the admonitions given in his other letters, Paul reaches out to make sure that the slave/property is treated with honor and respect.

We can see in Paul's theology a full understanding of God as Judge in all the permutations of the Old Testament. Paul's understanding of God was not one that changed God from the Old Testament to the new. Rather in the life and death of Christ, we have seen the mystery of God's redemption plan as it unfolded. It gives greater insight into God as Judge, but in no way does it change the Old Testament's revelation of God as Judge.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight (Jer. 9:23-24).*

God, the Just Judge, delights in steadfast love, justice, and righteousness. Do **you** have wisdom? Do **you** have power? Do **you** have money? NO! We must all recognize whatever we have is something God has placed into our care. It is what God owns. We are not giving the Lord, for example, "his 10 percent" when we tithe. We are recognizing that God has full ownership as we give him the first fruits of the harvest (or paycheck in the 21st century speak!). We should make a conscious effort to understand and see things this way.

2. *"Bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (Isa. 1:17).*

Consider how important it is or is not for us to stand up for the rights of those who cannot adequately stand up for themselves. It is an opportunity, but more than that, it is a duty. Our temptation is always to befriend the wealthy, popular, or powerful. Yet, God's call is to reach to those in greatest need of what we can offer in loving service on God's behalf.

3. *"The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ" (Rom 3:21).*

God stays fully in character as a just God who rules and judges consistent with himself. Yet, when faced with people in rebellion, unable to perform under an agreed covenant, God does not abandon the people to a just wrath. Rather, God sculpts another covenant that is based, not on works, but on trusting faith. There is no excuse for anyone who might refuse this free gift of God.