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## **GRACE, THE JUSTICE OF GOD, AND THE FUNCTION OF THE MILLENNIUM IN THE ATONEMENT**

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### **Introduction**

Grace is absolutely central to the plan of salvation. Yet, there is a sense in which grace—giving people what they don't deserve, giving them forgiveness and eternal life when they deserve condemnation and death—is essentially unjust.

In light of God being a God of grace, one of the central issues in any understanding of the atonement is the justice of God. How can God save some people and destroy others when all have rebelled and sinned against Him and His principles? It is the contention of this paper that the best answer to such questions is found in the Apocalypse of John. In examining that contention, we will look at the Apocalypse in terms of the Second Advent and God's judgment on sin, the millennial period and the universe's judgment on God, and the doxologies of the Apocalypse and the universe's verdict for God.

### **The Climax of History, the World's Longest Battle, and God's Judgment on Sin**

The great climax of history arrives in Revelation 19, with Christ symbolically pictured as galloping out of heaven on a white horse to engage Satan in the battle that eventually brings about the end of the struggle between good and evil (v. 11). That picture of the Second Advent should be seen as a continuation of God's atoning, reconciling, saving work. "In his cross and resurrection," writes George

Eldon Ladd, "Christ won a great victory over the powers of evil; by his second coming, he will *execute* that victory."<sup>1</sup>

One thing that takes place at the Second Advent is the resurrection of those who have died believing in Jesus (those who have accepted God's grace). While the wicked (those who have rejected God's grace) are slain at Christ's advent (Rev 19:1-21), the living and resurrected righteous are caught up to meet Jesus in the air and taken to heaven (1 Thess 4:15-17; 1 Cor 15:51-53; John 14:1-3). Thus, the earth is left without living people during the 1,000-year period of Rev 20.

Christ, however, speaks of recompense, not only for the righteous but also for the wicked (Matt 16:27). He also talks of two resurrections. He claims, "The hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment ['damnation,' KJV]" (John 5:28-29).<sup>2</sup>

The rewards for both groups, of course, result from the decision of the pre-Advent judgment (Dan 7:22-27). Jesus goes on to claim that His judgment is "just [fair or righteous]" because He is in harmony with the Father (John 5:30). Thus, Jesus ties divine justice or righteousness to the decision as to who will come forth in the two resurrections. Such an assertion of righteousness in judgment, however, is far from being demonstrable proof of the fact of justice. This is an especially important problem in a universe where Satan has insinuated that God could not justly save some sinners without saving all of them.

What Jesus does not make clear in John 5 is that 1,000 years will separate the two resurrections. That point is later revealed through John in Rev 20. According to that chapter, some people will be resurrected at the beginning of the 1,000 years (v. 4), while the "rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended" (v. 5). The context indicates that the first resurrection of Rev 20 is that of the righteous mentioned in John 5, while the second is that of "damnation," also mentioned in the Gospel. "Blessed and holy," writes the Revelator, "is he who shares in the first resurrection" (v. 6). Those who come up in the second resurrection soon meet the consuming fire of the "second death" (vv. 7-9).

Whereas the resurrection of the dead is a fairly common theme in Scripture, Rev 20 is the only explicit mention of the 1,000-year period in the Bible. That time period is referred to as the millennium, a Latin phrase meaning 1,000 years. Christian interpretations vary widely concerning the significance of the millennium and its place in the flow of history. For example, Ladd writes that "the New Testament nowhere expounds the theology of the millennium, that is, its purpose

<sup>1</sup>George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 252-53 (emphasis mine). Cited hereafter as *Revelation of John*.

<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the RSV.

in God's redemptive plan."<sup>3</sup> Yet, he claims that "in some way not disclosed in Scripture, the millennium is part of Christ's Messianic rule by which he puts all his enemies under his feet (1 Cor. 15:25)."<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, it is important to examine the context of Rev 20. The immediate and obvious context is the material in chaps. 19 and 21. Robert H. Mounce points out that the recurring phrase "and I saw," of Rev 19:11,17,19; 20:1,4,12; and 21:1 "appears to establish a sequence of visions which carries through from the appearance of the Rider on the white horse (Rev. 19:11) to the establishment of the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1ff)."<sup>5</sup> Ladd also sees a connected series of visions, with chap. 18 telling of the destruction of Babylon, chap. 19 the destruction of the beast and false prophet, and chap. 20 the destruction of Satan himself.<sup>6</sup>

The last half of chap. 19, as mentioned above, pictures Christ's second coming. This time, however, He comes not as the sacrificial Lamb of God, but as the "King of kings and Lord of lords" who will make war on all evil (vv. 11-21). Then comes Rev 20, after which we find a picture of Eden restored. John opens chap. 21 with a glimpse of "a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth [that is, those polluted by sin and its results] had passed away." Next, John sees the "holy city," God's "new Jerusalem," coming down from heaven with blessings from the throne room/sanctuary and that God Himself will now dwell with His people and provide them with the full blessings of His covenant. "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death [the penalty of sin] shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (vv. 1-4).

Rev 20, therefore, pictures the events that take place between the Second Advent and the establishment of God's perfect kingdom on earth. The millennium is the period that spans the gap from the time when sin was still alive and well, to the time when sin is no more. Rev 20 is the crucial link between those two very different earthly contexts. It holds an important place in God's great plan of at-one-ment, or reconciliation. At the end of the 1,000-year period, God finally eradicates the sin problem.

A further contextual understanding of Rev 20 is rooted in Rev 16. Verses 12-16, which describe the pouring out of the sixth plague, identify the three great symbolic adversaries of God: the dragon (identified as Satan in 12:9), the beast, and the false prophet. These three issue forth "demonic," wonder-producing spirits

<sup>3</sup>George Eldon Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977), 39.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 352.

<sup>6</sup>Ladd, *Revelation of John*, 261.

“who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. . . . And they assembled them at the place which is called in Hebrew *Armageddon*” (v. 16). Verses 14 and 15 make it clear that God’s “great day” for the battle is at the second coming of Christ.

This thought brings us back to Revelation’s description of the Second Advent in chap. 19. Near the end of the chapter we find an account of the first part of the battle of Armageddon. “And I saw,” writes John, “the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who sits upon the horse and against his army” (v. 19). In the next verse we find two of our three acquaintances from chap. 16, namely, the beast and the false prophet. Christ captures and destroys them in “the lake of fire” (v. 20).

With those two enemies (representing the leadership of Satan’s human agents on earth) annihilated, God turns to deal with the root of the problem, Satan himself. Chapter 20 opens with Satan being bound for the 1,000-year period (vv. 1-3).<sup>7</sup> At the end of that time, Satan and all his works and the results of sin are destroyed in “the lake of fire” (vv. 10,13-15). Armageddon, the final and decisive battle between Christ and Satan, is then over.

Thus, Armageddon is represented in Rev 19 and 20 as having two significant engagements, one at the beginning of the millennium and one at the end.<sup>8</sup> The second Armageddon engagement finds God executing His ultimate and complete wrath on those sinners who have refused to accept (1) His principles into their lives, and (2) Christ’s vicarious sacrificial propitiation (the basis of Grace) that turned aside the divine wrath (judgment on sin). Those individuals and forces destroyed in Armageddon will be those that have chosen to remain in rebellion against God, His government, and His law of love. Following the final destruction of Satan and the sin problem, Rev 21 and 22 depict the renovation of the earth into Eden restored (cf. 2 Pet 3:12,13).

### The Millennium and the Judgment “On” God

G. B. Caird claims that Rev 20 has been “the paradise of cranks and fanatics . . . and literalists.” Furthermore, “it bristles with questions.”<sup>9</sup> Why, he asks, must Satan be let loose to wreak further havoc after he had been firmly bound? And what claim does the devil have on God, that God is obliged to give him his due? Why the

<sup>7</sup>He is bound in the sense that with the righteous in heaven and the wicked in their graves he has no one to tempt or deceive. See Rev 20:2,7-8.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 256, 268.

<sup>9</sup>G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 249.

millennium? And what blessing do the righteous receive that makes it worth their while to wait 1,000 years for the greater bliss of the new earth?<sup>10</sup>

With such questions being raised by this controversial chapter, Caird sees several good reasons for leaving it out of the Bible. Nevertheless, in the face of the disturbing and troublesome issues suggested by Rev 20, he forcefully concludes that “the only safe inference is that *John included the millennium because it was an indispensable element in his vision of the future.*”<sup>11</sup>

The key to that “indispensable element” appears to be found in Rev 20:4, where the text refers to those to whom “judgment was committed.” Two questions arise from that short expression: (1) Who will be passing judgment? and (2) What is the nature of the millennial judgment?

With regard to the first question, Mounce suggests that according to Rev 20 “all we know for sure about the occupants of the throne is that judgment is given to them.”<sup>12</sup> He then goes on to note other Bible passages that help identify the occupants. The apostles, for example, were promised that they would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt 19:28). Paul told the Corinthian believers that “the saints will judge the world;” indeed, they would even “judge angels” (1 Cor 6:2-3).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, earlier in the Apocalypse we find Christ promising that all who conquered would sit with Him on His throne (2:26; 3:21). On the basis of these texts and others, Ladd indicates that the judges in Rev 20:4 probably include all the saved, since “this would accord with the biblical theology as a whole, which gives to the saints a share in the eschatological rule of Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

But what is the function of their judgment? What is left to be judged? After all, the saints have already been judged worthy to come up in the first resurrection (Luke 20:35), and the wicked have obviously been found to be unworthy, since they do not come up until the second resurrection. The judgment of Rev 20 is obviously *not* to see who is saved or lost. The decision regarding the fate of all human beings will have been made before the Second Coming. At Christ’s coming all will have received their just rewards. But questions arise: Were the rewards actually just? Did God really do the right thing in saving the saints while condemning those awaiting the second resurrection?

Those questions bring us back to certain troubling Bible passages. For instance, in Matt 25:31-46, we cannot forget the total shock of both the sheep and the goats in the parable of the judgment. “Why me?” ask some of those judged as unrighteous. They may have kept the law as perfectly as they could, yet they are lost. Why? Because, claims Jesus, they did not really love their neighbors. They did

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 251 (emphasis mine).

<sup>12</sup>Mounce, 354.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 355.

<sup>14</sup>Ladd, *Revelation of John*, 263.

not really care about the sick, the poor, and the downtrodden. Thus, they had not internalized the principles of God's kingdom. They were mere keepers of the letter of the law, but they were out of harmony with its spirit of love. However, those judged to be sheep, having internalized the spirit of the law, but not being necessarily as dedicated as the Pharisees to a total life of consciously keeping the outward aspects of the law, are equally surprised. Neither group receives what they think they deserve (vv. 37-39,44). If both sides in this parable show such surprise at the nature of their final rewards, how do we know that they were handed out correctly?

That brings me to the perplexing text of Matt 7:21-23. There Jesus declares:

Not every one who says to me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven. . . . On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers."

Such sayings seem to be rather arbitrary. These people were obviously Christian believers of some sort. Not only were they believers, but they appear to have possessed some powerful spiritual gifts. How can God be so sure He is rejecting the right individuals?

The entire problem is complicated by God's grace. *Remember that God in His grace gives people what they do not deserve.* This is why I essentially agreed with the older son in the parable of the prodigal in Luke 15, when I first read it as a 19-year-old agnostic. Thus, also my grumbling with the workers who had toiled through the heat of the day only to get paid the same amount as those who had worked only the last hour (Matt 20:1-16). Giving people what they do not deserve did not sit well with my human sense of justice. The problem even gets worse when one takes into account the fact that the rewards are eternal: immortal life versus eternal damnation (cf. Rom 6:23). And what if God gets so wild with grace that He gives it to some guy like Hitler or Stalin or people you personally know to have sexually abused 2-year-old children?

Can God really be trusted? That is the most important question of the universe. After all, look at the mess He allows to go on year after year. He has permitted thousands of years of murder, rape, and sins of every sort. In summarizing the sceptic's position, C. S. Lewis writes:

If God were good He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore, God lacks either goodness, or power, or both.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 26. See also John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 5.

So the question is urgent, “How can we trust such a Being?”

And one person dying for another does not seem to be much of a solution. From the time of Cain, Satan has challenged the validity of substitutionary sacrifice, claiming that God is arbitrary and that there is no justice in having the best of men die so that a pack of criminals and rebels can get what they definitely do not deserve. Neither grace nor forgiveness seems to be completely moral. How can God justify (declare as righteous) some people and destroy others eternally? And what is He going to do with those who were early turned from God by their parents or who were born into non-Christian cultures where they had never heard the name of Jesus? In short, the most important questions ever asked are, “Can God be trusted?” And, “If He can be, on what basis?”

That is what the millennium is all about. Its purpose is to provide the saints with the time and opportunity to pass judgment (Rev 20:4) on God’s judgment on sin and His solution in Christ. By extension, because of God’s judicious openness, the millennial judgment is the final phase of judgment by a concerned universe on how God has handled the sin problem on this earth, the lesson book of the entire cosmos (1 Cor 4:9).

The millennial judgment is the universe’s juridic validation of God’s justice and righteousness in justifying and eternally saving those who have accepted Christ’s sacrifice, while forever destroying other individuals who also sinned. Can God do this and still be trustworthy and just? That was the underlying problem Paul wrestled with in Rom 3:21-26. Earlier in chap. 3, Paul had been concerned that God might be “justified” in His words, and “prevail” when He was “judged.” Paul was quoting the Septuagint version of Ps 51, where David was dealing with the blamelessness of God in His judgment on and sentencing of sin (Rom 3:4; Ps 51:3-4). Thus, writes B. A. Gerrish, there is a sense in which “even God may be said to be justified.”<sup>16</sup> On a cosmic scale the great millennial judgment is the validation of God’s judgment on sin so that everyone sees the justice of His solution, and that solution is both the best and the only answer to the sin problem.

It is crucial that all questions about God and His righteousness are settled before He destroys sinners and Satan in the second death at the end of the millennium. After that point it will be too late. Thus, the cruciality of the 1,000-year period that takes place between the two resurrections.

It is my guess that life during the millennium will not be a completely peaceful time. Rather, it will be a time of healing and questioning and probably some weeping. How would you feel, for example, if you were to meet the murderer of your youngest child in the millennial kingdom? How would you react if, as far as you could tell, that person had gone to execution kicking, cursing, and unrepentant? There will be some saved like that. We know of one who first found

<sup>16</sup>B. A. Gerrish, “Justification,” *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John S. Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 314.

Jesus on the cross (Matt 27:44; Luke 23:39-43). Or how would you react if you discovered that one of the most saintly Christians you had ever known had failed to arise at the first resurrection? And what about family members whom you loved and felt you could never live without? What about sons, daughters, wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, and others with whom you shared closeness and who may be among the missing? What will be your attitude toward the God who intends to “execute” His judgment upon them at the end of the millennium? Could you really love and trust such a Being?

Coming to grips with those questions, feelings, and attitudes will be part of the work accomplished during the millennium. As in the pre-Advent phase of the judgment, God desires to keep no secrets. In that earlier phase “ten thousand times ten thousand” angelic beings witnessed the proceedings (Dan 7:10). The same kind of openness will be evident in the post-Advent phase of judgment.

Those resurrected will have a chance to examine and pass judgment on the evidence God has collected. The Bible speaks of books of judgment (Dan 7:10; 12:1; Phil 4:3; Rev 20:11-12). The presence of these books, Henry B. Swete concludes, indicates that “the sentence of the Judge is not arbitrary; it rests upon written evidence.”<sup>17</sup>

Rev 20:11-12 mentions two kinds of books, the book of life and another type, seemingly standing in contrast to the book of life. The books, Caird writes, “are the record books, containing all the evidence that the court needs if men are to be judged by their deeds.”<sup>18</sup> The book of life, Ladd suggests, “includes the names of all who have believed in Christ.”<sup>19</sup>

In Rev 20:11-12 these books are mentioned in connection with the very last act of judgment at the end of the millennium, when God pronounces final sentence. The “books” had earlier been used in the pre-Advent judgment of Dan 7, and it is reasonable to suppose that they will be used by the saints during the millennial judgment. After all, the truth has nothing to lose from open investigation, and God’s trustworthiness is the issue at hand. Just as God condescended to show the angels His justice and His righteousness in dealing with sinners in the pre-Advent judgment, so He does for the redeemed during the millennium.<sup>20</sup>

God’s record-keeping system is undoubtedly much more advanced than human systems that use computer technology and sophisticated audiovisual devices. Since God is more concerned with motives than with outward actions, it seems safe

<sup>17</sup>Swete, 272. During the time the Bible was being written, of course, there were few, if any, books as we know them. Records were kept on scrolls. Since that time record-keeping has progressively advanced from scrolls to bound books to computer technology.

<sup>18</sup>Caird, 259.

<sup>19</sup>Ladd, *Revelation of John*, 273.

<sup>20</sup>See Edward Heppenstall, *Our High Priest* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1972), 209.



to assume that His record-keeping system includes human thoughts and motivations as well as actions.

With that in mind, let us go back to our questions about why some people obviously destined for hell come up in the resurrection of the righteous, while some of those we felt should have been in the first resurrection remain in their graves awaiting the second. "Why God?" is the question that must be answered. "How can You justify this or that particular decision?" In answer, God points to the record "books." I respond by pushing the "computer button" representing the name of my favorite preacher, a person whom I believed to be a saint of saints, but who is still sleeping in the earth after the beginning of the millennium.<sup>21</sup>

Suddenly, the record of his life flashes onto the screen in Technicolor and octophonic sound (or whatever type of system God has). There for me to see is the fact that my friend's inner life did not match up with his outer. In fact, to my surprise, I see that even his outward life was different from what he claimed to believe, especially when he was "far enough" away from home or behind closed doors. The shocking realization hits me that he was not in harmony with God's principles and would not be happy in heaven.

With true heartache I turn off his record, realizing in a stab of shock that God had been right after all. Not being satisfied with that one case, however, I check out several more. Each time I reach the same conclusion—God is right—He knew more about my closest friends than I did. He had done the best thing.

On the other hand, some of those who arose "with" the saints shock me just as much as those who did not. There obviously had been a frightful mix-up. I do not want to say much about it, but finally I just cannot stand it any longer. So I go to the books of condemnation and push the button for one "I know" to have been an unrepentant child abuser to the very end of his earthly life.

All I get is a blank at first, but then a signal flashes on the heavenly "computer screen," indicating that I am in the wrong document file. Rather haltingly approaching the "book of life" files, I again push this person's "button." To my genuine surprise, I find his name and "experience" his conversion through God's sophisticated technology. The record shows that he has a new heart and mind and truly loves Jesus, even though, because of the last-minute (the eleventh hour of Matt 20:6) nature of his conversion, he did not have much earthly time to demonstrate his new attitudes and actions.

Stunned, and not completely sure, I shut off the machine. For a while I do not feel comfortable around this individual, even though he has come up as a "saint." But from a distance I observe him from time to time, only to discover that God truly

<sup>21</sup>Perhaps I should point out the elements of fact and fiction in the accounts below that attempt to illustrate the millennial investigation. The accounts, as I see them, are true to millennial purpose, but are obviously parabolic. However, my dinner with the preacher actually took place and I had that reaction.

knew what He was doing. This “new man” is certainly a saint if I ever saw one. The full force of God’s redeeming love and transforming power hits me as I realize the miracle that I have witnessed. “God,” I almost shout, “is just and righteous and His judgments are true in every case.” I have nothing but praise for Him.

But I have a friend who still is not convinced that everything is right. My friend had loved her oldest son with fierce devotion throughout her long years of earthly motherhood. He had been what we had called a “good boy” during our time on earth. That is, he had been a good boy up until he was 23 years old. That was the year his father had died. During that year the young man turned against all he had once stood for. At first it was only a case of the outward signs of remorse in response to the great injustice that had befallen him. But then it turned into deep-seated rebellion. Feeling abused himself, he developed a character that consistently mistreated others.

His mother, as you might expect, was deeply upset by the physical loss of her husband and the spiritual loss of her son. Unlike the boy, however, she did not turn against God. In fact, the experience softened her. After all, had not God lost His “beloved” on the cross? Her response to her great loss was one of daily prayer for her rebellious son. She was strong in faith that he would be in the kingdom. She went to her deathbed firmly believing that he would be converted. But, she hastened to add, if he were not converted, she did not want to be in heaven either. She could never be happy without her boy.

I know her struggles and her convictions, because I was there when she died, and I later conducted her funeral. After her death I continued to work with the son, but to no avail. He was finally shot three times and killed while resisting federal agents in a drug crackdown.

I am glad to meet the mother soon after the first resurrection. As I expected, she had been looking in vain for her wayward treasure. She asks me what I know of him, and I fill her in on the newspaper stories. I then suggest that she “push his button” in the divine record system to get the full story. Feeling she needs support, I volunteer to sit through the experience with her. She views it over and over and over again.

His case seems plain enough to me, but she is devastated, weeping profusely. Somewhere I had been taught that there would be no tears after the second coming of Christ, but I am beginning to realize that I must have been wrong. I check my Bible and find that it plainly promises that all tears will be wiped away *after* the millennium (Rev 21:4; cf. Isa 65:17-19), but it gives no such assurance for the millennial period.

My weeping friend still is not sure she wants to be in the kingdom if her son is not there. At that point I suggest that we “experience” the video of his life one more time. On this viewing I stop it from time to time, trying to help her realize that her son could not possibly be happy in God’s kingdom because everything he stood for was diametrically opposed to God’s law of love.

I tell her the story of the first time I had dinner with a preacher. Back in those days, not knowing any ministers, I thought they were all perfect, or at least very close to it. But then, when I was 19 years old, I began to attend church so that I could spend more time with my girlfriend. I soon concluded that I had made a mistake, because before I knew it we had been invited to dinner by the young preacher and his wife. The day of the dinner was the longest and one of the most miserable in my life, up to that point. I had dreaded it all week, and it turned out to be more uncomfortable than I had expected. Being totally out of harmony with his principles, I had to watch everything I did, said, and how I said it.

Since that day I have often thought about what it would be like to have to live for eternity in the presence of the omniscient God if I were out of harmony with Him. Such an experience would be more like a living hell than heaven.

Using my personal experience, I try to help my friend understand what C. S. Lewis had enabled me to see sometime before the Second Advent. Lewis taught that there are only three possible states of existence: (1) to be God, (2) to be like God, or (3) to be miserable.<sup>22</sup> This third category represents the end result of lives that are out of harmony with God's character of giving and loving. People in that group would be doubly miserable in the company of a holy God.

Ellen G. White teaches a similar perspective when she writes,

The sinner could not be happy in God's presence; he would shrink from the companionship of holy beings. Could he be permitted to enter heaven, it would have no joy for him. The spirit of unselfish love that reigns there—every heart responding to the heart of Infinite Love—would touch no answering chord in his soul. His thoughts, his interests, his motives, would be alien to those that actuate the sinless dwellers there. . . . *Heaven would be to him a place of torture*; he would long to be hidden from Him who is its light, and the center of its joy. It is no arbitrary decree on the part of God that excludes the wicked from heaven; they are shut out by their own unfitness for its companionship.<sup>23</sup>

My friend, the distraught mother, is beginning to realize that God is doing what is best for her boy. It hurts deeply for her to recognize that fact, but more and more clearly she sees that the God of love could not and would not force anyone to be saved.

She even starts to grasp the fact that eternal annihilation is better than eternal misery, the fruit of sin. Through her reddened eyes she begins to see a new aspect of God's love. She does not like all that she sees, but she realizes that God is

<sup>22</sup>Lewis, 54.

<sup>23</sup>Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 17-18 (emphasis mine). Cf. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 670.

making the very best out of a disastrous situation, that He still wants the very best for her son. She sees at last, through her tears, that her son could never be happy in heaven. She also sees that the best and most loving alternative would be for him to be as if he had never been (we will return to that topic below). *My motherly friend finally sees that God's solution is not merely the best solution, but the only solution to the sin problem.*

### The Verdict "For" God in the Apocalyptic Doxologies

At this point we need to look at a prominent doxological theme that runs throughout the book of Revelation. That theme, often bursting forth in songs of praise, is the worthiness, justice, and truthfulness of God.

Rev 4 and 5, for example, repeatedly declare God's worthiness in the context of the heavenly throne room/sanctuary. "*Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power*" (Rev 4:11). In 5:4 John wept because he could find no one "worthy" to unseal the mysterious scroll. Then the Lamb entered, and the heavenly beings "sang a new song, saying, '*Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men to God*'" (v. 9). That song was shortly followed by the numberless host of heaven "saying with a loud voice, '*Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!*'" (v. 12).

In these passages it is of more than passing interest to note that the "worthiness" of Christ to undo the seals of the scroll of salvation history is directly related to His propitiatory sacrifice on the cross. It was that sacrifice, Paul claims, that shows God's righteousness in justifying sinners through grace (Rom 3:24-26).

The second major round of worshipful doxologies is found at the time when the seven last plagues are poured out during a period of divine judgment. God's justice and truthfulness are praised at least three times in chaps. 15 and 16. "*Just and true are your ways,*" sing the victorious saints (Rev 15:3); "*just art thou in these thy judgments,*" the angel proclaims at the pouring out of the third bowl. The altar responds with the cry: "Yea, Lord God the Almighty, *true and just are thy judgments!*" (Rev 16:5,7).

The third series in Revelation's doxological sequence takes place at the Second Coming of Christ. Chapter 19 opens with "a great multitude in heaven, crying 'Hallelujah! *Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just*'" (vv. 1-2). Then, later in the chapter, the coming Christ on His white horse "is called *Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war*" (v. 11).

Now either the heavenly hosts and/or the apostle John has an unhealthy fascination with the topic of God's truthfulness, justice, and worthiness to judge, or it is a central problem in the great controversy between good and evil. The latter position is the correct one. Whereas the heavenly hosts were largely convinced of the justice of God at the cross, they would have had all their questions answered by

the time of the Second Advent of Christ in Rev 19. The resurrected saints will have the same opportunity to validate God's righteousness in solving the sin problem during the millennial judgment of Rev 20. The purpose of that judgment is to clear up any final questions before God puts an end to sin. Thus, He provides both adequate time and adequate records that He might be vindicated before all created beings.

At the end of the millennium, after all questions concerning God's righteousness and trustworthiness have been settled, God resurrects the wicked. At that time, the Bible says, Satan is loosed from his prison and goes "out to deceive" those who come up in the second resurrection. He gathers his multitude together for the second half of Armageddon, and they surround "the camp of the saints." At that point, fire comes down from heaven and *consumes* them (Rev 20:7-9).

For years I wondered why God would raise the wicked merely so they could be snuffed out again. Mounce writes that "perhaps the most reasonable explanation for this rather unusual parole is to make plain that neither the designs of Satan nor the waywardness of the human heart will be altered by the mere passing of time."<sup>24</sup> White is even more specific: "In his last great effort to dethrone Christ, destroy His people, and take possession of the city of God, the archdeceiver (is) *fully unmasked*."<sup>25</sup> In their last destructive moves, Satan and his followers provide one final validation for the correctness of God's judgment. They have not changed. They come out of the grave with the same character they had upon entering it.

With all the universe satisfied that Satan's principles lead to death, animosity, and destruction, God is at last free to deal decisively with the sin problem without creating fear and without spreading the doubt that Satan had insinuated concerning His love. It is from that perspective that Rev 20:11-15 presents the last great act of divine executive judgment. At that point in history, God eradicates Satan, his followers, and the results of sin. They are consumed in the "lake of fire" (vv. 9,15).

Strange as it may sound at first, God demonstrates His mercy even in the final destruction of the wicked. God wants the best for all His creatures. He wants their happiness. By the time of the Second Advent, He will have done everything possible to reach down and rescue people from their alienation and selfishness, but some will have rejected His outreach. God will not force His love on the rejecters of His grace. The acceptance of the principles of love and the healing they bring cannot be coerced. Satan's sin and selfishness ultimately leads to self-destructive misery. God is caught in a paradox: either He can let sinners continue to exist in endless unhappiness or He can mercifully put them out of their self-chosen misery. There are no other choices. God opts for the latter.

<sup>24</sup>Mounce, 361. (Cf. p. 354).

<sup>25</sup>White, *Great Controversy*, 670 (emphasis mine).

His choice, however, has been misunderstood and perverted beyond recognition. One of the most misleading theories in religious history is the one claiming that the merciful and loving God of the Bible will torture people unmercifully, forever and ever, in endless flames. That theory certainly casts doubt on God's character by making Him into a kind of an infinite Hitler.<sup>26</sup> That interpretation has forwarded the original accusation of God through the ages. It proclaims that God truly is unjust and cannot be trusted. Beyond that, it furthers the unnatural fear of God that entered with sin in Gen 3. In fact, it is a continuation of Satan's first lie to Eve, "You will not die" (Gen 3:4).

To the contrary, God says that the wages of sin is death, not immortality in hell (Rom 6:23). Thus, Rev 20:9 makes it explicit that hell-fire "consumes" the wicked. The results are eternal. Those consumed will be burned up and be as if they had never been (Mal 4:1).

The imagery of the lake of fire, suggests Michael Green, "probably denotes final and irreversible ruin and *annihilation* rather than endless torment."<sup>27</sup> Another Oxford scholar, John W. Wenham, comes to similar conclusions when he writes that "it might be nearer the mark to think of their end as a *merciful euthanasia* than as a callous execution."<sup>28</sup>

The bottom line on who will be in heaven, it seems, is determined by the standard of who will be happy there. All who could be happy with God will be there. Those with that attitude, of course, will be willing to live in harmony with God's great law of love (they will live lives of grace themselves), which will affect every part of their lives. Those rejecting God's way are laid to permanent rest.

God's purpose is not endless torture for His erring children, but endless sleep in death. In that context, Emil Brunner's startling statement that "the wrath of God is the love of God"<sup>29</sup> makes good sense. In His judgment on sin, God does the best thing possible in a perplexing situation. Peter Taylor Forsyth writes that punishment must be viewed "as an indirect and collateral necessity, like the surgical pains that make room for nature's curing power."<sup>30</sup> God's solution once again demonstrates that He is righteous and trustworthy.

White pens that by the end of the millennium

The whole universe will have become witnesses to the nature and results of sin. And its utter extermination, which in the beginning would have brought

<sup>26</sup>See George R. Knight, "The Infinite Hitler," *Signs of the Times*, July 1997, 10-13.

<sup>27</sup>Michael Green, *I Believe in Satan's Downfall* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 218.

<sup>28</sup>John W. Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil: Can We Believe in the Goodness of God?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 38, n. 9 (emphasis mine).

<sup>29</sup>Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947), 187.

<sup>30</sup>Peter Taylor Forsyth, *The Work of Christ* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.), 135.

fear to angels and dishonor to God, will now vindicate His love and establish His honor before the universe of beings who delight to do His will, and in whose heart is His law.<sup>31</sup>

Because all the universe is satisfied that God can be trusted and that Satan's principles lead to deterioration and death, she goes on to say that sin will never arise again.

A tested and proved creation will never again be turned from allegiance to Him whose character has been fully manifested before them as fathomless love and infinite wisdom.<sup>32</sup>

Satan's rebellion will be a lesson to the universe throughout eternity on the nature of sin. "Thus the history of this terrible experiment of rebellion" will be a "perpetual safeguard" to God's universe.<sup>33</sup>

Similar thoughts are expressed elsewhere:

*Through Christ's redeeming work the government of God stands justified.* The Omnipotent One is made known as the God of love. Satan's charges are refuted, and his character unveiled. Rebellion can never again rise. Sin can never again enter the universe. Through eternal ages all are secure from apostasy.<sup>34</sup>

Theoretically, of course, sin could rise again. After all, it arose unexplainably and spontaneously the first time because of the power of choice that God gave His creatures. God has not taken away that power, nor can He, without changing His own nature. Thus, it is theoretically possible for sin to rise a second time, but it is safe to say that it would not be able to rise very high. The entire universe will have come to love and trust God, and all will have seen the results of sin. God, therefore, will be in a position to put down any rebellion immediately. The great experiment with sin will never need to be repeated. The cross of Christ demonstrated once and for all the love of God and the malignity of sin.

Sin, we must never forget, is not a personal aberration. Rather, as Brunner rightly claims, it is "an attack on God's honor."<sup>35</sup> It is an assault on the cosmic moral order. Because of what sin is, the greatest challenge ever faced by God was

<sup>31</sup>White, *Great Controversy*, 504.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 499.

<sup>34</sup>Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1940), 26 (emphasis mine).

<sup>35</sup>Emil Brunner, *The Mediator*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 444.

to meet it responsibly and decisively in a manner that would preserve the moral order of the universe and at the same time demonstrate both His love and His justice.

The crisis of sin is not merely a human crisis, but a divine crisis. Sin deeply affected the stability of God's universe. God, seeing the magnitude and subtlety of the problem, has not treated it lightly. His answer to the sin problem is the life and death of Jesus Christ and the extension of grace to sinners. James S. Stewart writes insightfully, "At the heart of the Christian doctrine of atonement stands the fact that if our sin has serious consequences for ourselves, it has terrible consequences for God."<sup>36</sup>

God gave of Himself to meet the problem. The life of Christ demonstrated that God's law of love could be kept, while His death demonstrated both God's love and justice on the one hand, and Satan's hate and unfairness on the other. Christ's sacrifice prepared the way for God to gracefully forgive on a moral basis by taking into account the full penalty of the broken law.

It was at the cross, Forsyth indicates, that God justified "Himself and His holy law. . . . If He had not vindicated His holiness to the uttermost . . . it would not be a kind of holiness that men could trust."<sup>37</sup> Because God has first justified Himself in holiness, He can also justify human beings and still be righteous.<sup>38</sup>

The fruits of God's great plan of reconciliation or at-one-ment through Christ, as has been repeatedly noted, are not just for Himself and earthlings. The New Testament pictures the sin problem as having cosmic proportions. Thus, Paul could write:

We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Eph 6:12)

Paul also indicates that the implications of the solution are of universal import. Thus, he asserts that God is reconciling to Himself all things, "whether on earth or in heaven," through the cross of Christ (Col 1:20). The end result of God's program for handling sin will be "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10-11).

Thus, both the problem of sin and God's solution to that calamity affect the entire universe. Vincent Taylor argues convincingly, "Wherever Christian teaching

<sup>36</sup>James S. Stewart, *A Faith to Proclaim* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1953), 69.

<sup>37</sup>Forsyth, 136.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.



narrows the idea of the Atonement to a prospect less dazzling than this it is untrue to the New Testament.”<sup>39</sup>

### It Is Really Finished

At the end of the millennium God stands vindicated and justified before the universe. Sin has been destroyed, and the Holy City descends out of heaven so that God can re-create the planet to be the home of those redeemed from sin. All tears have been wiped away, and there is no more death, suffering, or sorrow (Rev 21:1-4; 2 Pet 3:12-13).

The atonement (at-one-ment) is finally completed. All who can be reconciled to God have been. White captures the idea beautifully,

The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love.<sup>40</sup>

John the Revelator documents it with the effect of a great crescendo. He beheld

a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels stood round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, “Amen! *Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen!*” (Rev 7:9-12)

All are convinced that the God of grace can indeed be trusted.

<sup>39</sup>Vincent Taylor, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching*, 2d ed. (London: Epworth, 1945), 168.

<sup>40</sup>White, *Great Controversy*, 678. A point of special interest is that the first three words of the first volume and the last three words of the last one of Ellen White’s five-volume set depicting the great controversy theme are the same: “God is love.” To her, that was the point at issue in the struggle between Christ and Satan and it was what God demonstrated in His multiplex plan of atonement.