

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

WRATH AND JUDGMENT

In the Creed we confess that at the last day Jesus shall come to judge the living and the dead. Jesus Himself tells us at John 5.22 that “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son” (*and see 5.27*). The statement of faith has a necessary corollary, that the Savior is also the Judge. We are required, therefore, to reconcile our belief in salvation, and in the revelation that God is love (1 John 4.8), with the scriptural revelation of the wrath of God. At Psalm 103.10-12 we are taught that the LORD “... has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our wickedness” and that “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us,” and yet examples abound in Scripture of both judgment executed and judgment to come. We will examine:

1. The wrath of God as expressed in this world.
2. The final judgment to salvation or damnation.
3. The justice of God (theodicy).

Case Studies: Before we go any further, let’s consider three “case studies” in justice and judgment (with wrath being a part of judgment).

Genesis 18.17-33: Abraham and the LORD discuss the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah:

The story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19.1–29) comprises a stark example of the judgment of God upon the wickedness of mankind. As in the story of the Flood (Gen. 6.5–8.19), a righteous remnant is spared by God and preserved from destruction, and this preservation serves as a witness to a covenant made by God (after the fact in the case of Noah, before the fact in the case of Abraham). As in the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11.1–9), God's judgment follows only upon His careful investigation of the nature of the offense. The signal difference among these stories may be found in the exchange which precedes the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and it is in this exchange—this theological dialogue—that we find a key revelation of the nature of the God of Israel as the God of the universe: that “the Judge of all the earth [shall] do justice.”

Genesis 18.17–33 (RSV)

¹⁷ The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸ seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him? ¹⁹ No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him." ²⁰ Then the LORD said, "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, ²¹ I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me; and if not, I will know." ²² So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom; but Abraham still stood before the LORD. ²³ Then Abraham drew near, and said, "Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ Suppose

there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt thou then destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵ Far be it from thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" ²⁶ And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake." ²⁷ Abraham answered, "Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. ²⁸ Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Wilt thou destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." ²⁹ Again he spoke to him, and said, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." ³⁰ Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." ³¹ He said, "Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." ³² Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." ³³ And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

This passage represents a specific theological enquiry into the nature of the justice of God. The question is, in essence, whether "justice" in v. 25 ("right" in the RSV) is simply synonymous with what God wills—whether it represents an absolute, unquestionable standard by which mankind is judged (*i.e.*, what God says is justice *is* justice)—or whether it is seen as somehow dependent on a standard of justice understood of the human mind. The content of the dialogue can be seen to form a judicial enquiry, with the LORD as judge and Abraham as judicial intercessor. The LORD begins the dialogue proper at v. 20, referring to the “outcry” from Sodom and Gomorrah. What He has said in vv. 17–19, in which He decides to share His purpose (“what I am about to do”) with Abraham, may be seen to have been intended by the Yahwist editor of Genesis as something to be overheard by Abraham, thus explaining his intercession made with knowledge of God’s intention. In other words, the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah is not decided already, and God is inviting the intercession of Abraham in the same manner in which He leaves an opening for Moses to intercede against the destruction of the Israelites at Exod. 32:10 (“... now therefore *let me alone*, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; ...”)

The fact that God is making an enquiry is made evident also by the use of language. He is responding to an *outcry*. *God* is raising the issue of justice before Abraham does. The term “outcry” (*zē’āqā*) is a technical term which designates the cry for justice of one who suffers, which opens a legal investigation. The very content of this investigation thus forms a midrash—a legal justification—for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. This juxtaposition of an ancient tradition of natural disaster with the crises within the religious community at the time of a Yahwist redaction (the disasters of the early sixth century B.C.) can serve to explain the nature of the text as a reflection on the nature of God’s justice. The LORD makes no unambiguous announcement of destruction. In vv. 20–21, the LORD decides to investigate, to determine whether the situation in Sodom and Gomorrah warrants outcry. In the same way that the LORD “[went] down to see” the situation at the tower of Babel (Gen. 11.5), here (v. 21) He determines, “... I will go down to see ...” Judgment is not presupposed.

Prayer formulae are absent in Abraham’s pleas. His intercession is judicial rather than in the form of worship. In questioning the nature of God’s justice, “Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked?” (*cf.* Job 9.22–24, will the righteous fare with the wicked?, and Amos 9.10, only the guilty shall be punished), Abraham gives voice to an issue both of theodicy and of

human fears about human destiny. In fine, this passage marks a significant transition from the concept of collective guilt and retribution to the belief that each individual reaps the reward of his or her own conduct or character. In the older understanding of sin, sin does not result in pollution, but is pollution itself. It is contamination, defilement that can only be cleansed by ritual ablation or tangible, physical removal. (Cf. the scapegoat in Lev. 16.20–22; and see Deut. 21.1–9.) Thus, this passage comments on both the nature of God and on man’s relationship to God: the two can be hardly separated.

As a theological reflection, then, the passage is providing insight both into the nature of God and into that of man. Prior to the actual dialogue itself, Abraham is placed in the role of theological teacher, by the LORD’s description of him as the one chosen to do righteousness and justice. The theological reflection is expressed in a two-fold manner, by what God says and does, and by the framing of the questions of Abraham.

Abraham acts as judicial intercessor, but as one who presupposes that God does intend to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. He asks, rhetorically, at v. 23 whether both the wicked and the righteous are to be destroyed. The term he uses for the “righteous,” *s^edāqā*, a nominative feminine form, may be translated to mean “a faithful member of the community” or “fruit of righteousness”. The terms *mišpāṭ* and *s^edāqā* are both uncommon in Genesis, and yet the latter is found seven times in vv. 23–28. Of note, although the people of Sodom and Gomorrah lie outside of the covenant between Abraham and God, Abraham intercedes for them, for aliens. Abraham does not mention here his kinsman, Lot, but pleads on the basis that God’s justice will apply equally to all, the passage testifying to all mankind falling within the Noachitic covenant of Gen. 9.9, 15.¹ He seeks to draw a distinction between the “righteous” (*saddīq*) and the *rāšā* (the “guilty”). These usages presuppose a judicial process, connoting respectively “the one found not guilty” and “the one judged guilty”. In effect, Abraham appeals to the LORD’s character, challenging the then conventional view that the few guilty can bring destruction upon the righteous, and arguing that the few righteous can save the many guilty. This is a new calculus, itself reflecting an Exilic era focus on the fate of the righteous. (Cf. Ezek. 14.12–20.) This is *der stellvertretend bewahrenden Funktion* (the “vicarious preserving function”) of the righteous man as a part of a new understanding of sin and justice.²

Abraham and the LORD are concerned with justice, with *mišpāṭ*. *Mišpāṭ* can be understood to reflect a sense of precedential justice, of justice as reflecting the past decisions. Abraham may thus be seen to plead that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah would be out of accord with God’s past actions, the equivalent of saying such action would be out of God’s character. *Mišpāṭ* may also be taken to be more abstract, to refer to “what is just,” begging the question of God’s character. In a nutshell, Abraham is *enquiring* into the character of God, to determine whether God’s actions can be judged by some standard which accords with Abraham’s own moral judgment.

¹ The covenant with Noah has been argued to form the basis for a Jewish understanding of natural law. J. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 1997), 202–203. Most rabbinical commentary identified seven Noachitic commandments, including one to refrain from sexual immorality. *Id.* at 203, citing the *Tosfeta* (i.e., a late second century A.D. work, drawing on oral tradition of much greater antiquity).

² Luther considered this story to exemplify the preserving (salvific) power of the few righteous. M. Luther, “Lectures on Genesis Chapters 15–20,” in *Luther’s Works* vol. 3, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1961), 235.

The LORD does not make any unequivocal intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah known. He reveals His intent to enquire about the basis for outcry, and must this not be construed in conjunction with the soliloquy of vv. 17–19, spoken aloud by the LORD so that Abraham may know his mind? It is Abraham who takes the LORD’s description of outcry and announcement of investigation to be an announcement of imminent destruction (cf. v. 23). Given the fact that God does not destroy the cities with righteous within them, can not this passage—so often characterized as Abraham bargaining with God—be seen to be God *teaching* Abraham, teaching him about the nature of God, of His predilection to mercy and forgiveness? Recall that it is God who first raised the issue of justice and righteousness in vv. 17–19, before Abraham’s questioning, questioning which was in fact based on Abraham’s misapprehension of God’s purpose, drawn from information no more complete than the statement in vv. 17–19, that God will not hide from Abraham what He is about to do, and the statement in v. 21, “... I will go down to see ...”

Abraham and the LORD are not bargaining. God never makes a “counteroffer” to any count of the righteous proposed by Abraham to be a saving remnant. Abraham may indeed use the extravagant language of the bazaar, and does abase himself, but God in no wise enters into a barter process. He merely agrees to each proposal to lower the number of righteous required. This begs the question, often commented upon, of why Abraham stopped at ten. The theory has been offered that this is an example of the importance of community, with ten being the minimum number of persons necessary to constitute a synagogue,³ but the fact that Lot is rescued would indicate that individuals count. More to the point, the escalation in the extravagance of language of Abraham in petitioning God, and the increase in his abasement, would seem to indicate that he stopped because God (who then “went His way,” knowing full well that not one righteous man was to be found in the cities) indicated that the dialogue was ending. Abraham did not, in effect, bargain with God or push Him in a direction other than that which He purposed. In truth, the pushing took place in the opposite direction. God pushed Abraham, the future teacher of justice and righteousness, to understand that way of God. The dialogue is a part of God’s revelation to Abraham of His generous mercy, a revelation at that point “finished” (*i.e.*, using the same language to indicate completion as found at Gen 2.1, at the completion of creation).

God did in fact rescue the innocent Lot and his family (Gen. 19.15–17), although He did not pardon the guilty residents of the cities for the sake of Lot. In His omnipotence he adopted a solution not envisaged by Abraham in the dialogue, of saving the lives of the innocent by persuading them to leave the doomed city, and immediately (Gen. 19.24–25) destroying the guilty cities with their inhabitants. Abraham takes for granted—within his framework of collective guilt—that all must be saved or all must be destroyed. The story represents a new development in the revelation of God’s nature.⁴

At a critical juncture in the history of Israel (right after God has announced to Abraham that Sarah shall bear his son), God first makes His way clear to Abraham as the one who will teach

³ N. M. Sarna, *The Jewish Publication Society Commentary: Genesis*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Pub. Soc., 1989), 134. *But see* Jer. 5.1 (one righteous man may justify Jerusalem).

⁴ Note that Abraham and God do not proceed by petition and concession, but by question and answer. For the first time in the canon Abraham is appearing as intercessor and *prophet*. This story appears in the canon before other instances of prophets interceding with God (*e.g.*, Moses at Exod. 32; Amos at Amos 7.1–6). These later prophets intercede to ask forgiveness, that God might stay His wrath. (*Abraham* is first referred to by YHWH Himself as a “prophet” at Gen. 20.7, when he intercedes for Abimelech).

justice and righteousness *to his children*. And what is revealed to Abraham? First, that God's way is the way of mercy; the LORD turns out to be more merciful than Abraham presupposes in his questions or in his attempt to bargain. Secondly, that human response to God is crucial. God leaves the door open to Abraham to intercede (just as he later does with Moses), and the fact that Abraham has been made a party to God's decisions is made evident at Gen. 19.29, with the rescue of Lot. God thus raises Abraham, patriarch of His chosen people, to be the prophet who will teach, but also the prophet who will intercede.

Cur Deus homo?

In his famous treatise on the Incarnation, *Cur Deus homo?* (literally, "Why the God man?"), St. Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109) defined sin to be "not rendering to God what is His due" (1.11),⁵ namely the submission of our entire will to His. To sin, therefore, is to take away from God that which is His own, which means to steal from Him and so dishonor Him. If we imagine that God can simply forgive us as we might forgive others, we discount the seriousness of sin (1.21). "[N]othing is less tolerable ... than that the creature should take away from the Creator the honour due to him, and not repay what he takes away" (1.12).

So what is to be done? God upholds His honor, and if we are to be forgiven we must render what we owe. Yet, we are incapable of doing this, either for ourselves or for others. Any present obedience and good works cannot make satisfaction, since these are only what is required already. So we cannot save ourselves, and no one else can save us, for "one who is a sinner cannot justify a sinner" (1.23). We owe what we cannot repay, and unless satisfaction is made we cannot be saved.

No one *can* make satisfaction to God except God, but no one *must* and ought except mankind. Therefore, in His infinite mercy God satisfies His justice by becoming man. A being who is God and not man, or man and not God, or a mixture of both and therefore neither man or God, would not qualify. "It is needful that the very same Person who is to make this satisfaction be perfect God and perfect man," (2.7) but in Jesus "God the Word and man meet" (2.9). Jesus also gave Himself up to death as a unique work—not as a debt, for He was sinless and thus under no obligation to pay this debt, but freely for the honor of God.

Anselm's argument was developed in the non-feudal context of the twentieth century (*i.e.*, in a context less concerned with honor in the abstract) by the Swiss theologian Emil Brunner. In his work *The Mediator*, Brunner describes sin as an assault upon the moral order which is an *expression of God's will*:

The law of his divine being, on which all law and order in the world is based, ... the logical and reliable character of all that happens, the validity of all standards, of all intellectual, legal and moral order, the Law itself, in its most profound meaning, demands the divine reaction, the divine concern about sin, the divine resistance to this rebellion and this breach of order ... If this were not true, then there would be no seriousness in the world at all; there would be no meaning in anything, no order, no stability; the world order would fall into ruins; chaos and desolation would be supreme. All order in the

⁵ Citations are by section number, from the standard translation of Edward S. Prout (London: Religious Tract Soc., 1907).

world depends upon the inviolability of [God's] honor, upon the certitude that those who rebel against him will be punished.⁶

“Southern fried religion”:

When many people think about wrath and judgment, their focus is on accountability. This is sometimes thought of as Puritanism or “Southern fried religion,” in which it is taught and preached that a person must “get right with God” or be damned. This “hell fire and brimstone” approach is, in fact, “pious opinion”. A classic example of this is the famous sermon of the Puritan divine Jonathan Edwards (d. 1758), *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, first preached on 8 July 1741. In this sermon Edwards sets forth doctrine that became a core part of the message of the so-called “Great Awakening” (ca. 1730–1755) in America. Edwards’ key message is: “*There is nothing that keeps wicked men at any one moment out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God.*” He sets forth ten “considerations”, which are posed and justified through a combined use of observations and hellish imagery. They are as follows:

1. There is no want of power in God to cast wicked men into hell at any moment in time.
2. The wicked deserve to be cast into hell: so that divine justice never stands in the way, it makes no objection against God using his power at any moment to destroy them.
3. They are already under a sentence of condemnation to hell.
4. They are now the objects of that very same anger and wrath of God that is expressed in the torments of hell: and the reason why they do not go down to hell at each moment, is not that God, in whose power they are, is not then very angry with them; as he is with many of those miserable creatures that he is now tormenting in hell, and do there feel and bear the fierceness of his wrath.
5. Satan stands ready to fall upon them and seize them as his own, at what moment God shall permit him.
6. There are in the souls of wicked men those hellish principles reigning, that would presently kindle and flame out into hellfire, if it were not for God's restraints.
7. It is no security to wicked men for one moment, that there are no visible means of death at hand.
8. Natural men's prudence and care to preserve their own lives, or the care of others to preserve them, does not secure them a moment
9. All wicked men's pains and contrivance they use to escape hell, while they continue to reject Christ, and so remain wicked men, doesn't secure them from hell for one moment.
10. God has laid himself under no obligation by any promise to keep any natural man out of hell for one moment.

The teachings reflected in these case studies represent very different understandings of God from those which are common in the 21st century. It is against this backdrop that we’ll examine what is revealed to us about God’s justice and wrath, and about final judgment.

The wrath of God: God’s wrath is a necessary attribute of His being. God’s almighty power is in no wise arbitrary. In the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, “In God, power, essence, will, intellect, wisdom and justice are all identical. Nothing therefore can be in God’s power

⁶ Translated by Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), 444. Brunner might well be postulating Post-modernism!

which could not be in his just will or his wise intellect” (*Summa Theologica* I, 25, 5, *ad* 1). The Church Father Lactantius (4th C.), in his work *De ira Dei* (“On the Anger of God”) argued that God is angry because He is moved by kindness, by His desire to uphold the moral order which is an expression of His will for His creation.

1. Terminology: There are several hundred references to divine wrath in the Old Testament. The expression most often used to represent divine anger is *‘ap*, a noun which derives from the word for “a snort,” and which can also mean “a nose”. In ancient Hebrew psychology the nose was the seat of anger. Thus, in God’s wrath “smoke went up from his nostrils” (Ps. 18.8). Verbs which refer to burning are also used to refer to the arousal of God’s anger (*see* Hos. 8.5), and can be combined to refer to burning anger (Ezek. 7.12; Exod. 32.12). The word *hēmā* can mean drunkenness or heat (*compare* Hos. 7.5 and Jer. 4.4). Other words may refer to “overflowing with rage” or “angry indignation”, and God’s wrath is also often referred to using metaphors drawn from the vocabulary of flood and famine, conflagration, or the language of cursing.

The *Septuagint* (LXX) Greek version of the Old Testament (*e.g.*, the version known to Matthew and Paul) refers to wrath or anger as *orgé* (for inner affect or emotion) or *thymos* (for outward manifestation). In the New Testament the usage basically follows LXX usage (*compare* Rom. 1.18 and Rev. 15.1, 7)

2. Wrath and sin: God’s wrath is described as provoked against Israel, groups within Israel, individuals, nations, and mankind in general. It affects the world of nature (Gen. 3.14, 17; Deut. 32.22; Isa. 13.9; 50.2; Jer. 10.10; Mal. 3.11), but in most cases the Bible links the provocation of God’s wrath to deliberate human attempts to frustrate His will and purpose for man’s salvation. The most common object of God’s wrath is therefore Israel as a whole, for:

- a. Murmuring against the LORD (lacking faith): Num. 11.1; Deut. 1.26-36; Ps. 78.21-22.
- b. Disobedience of an express command: Josh. 7.1.
- c. Scorn for God’s word: 2 Chr. 36.15-16; *cf.* Lam. 2.1, 22.
- d. Social injustice within the community of God’s people: Ps. 50.21-22; Isa. 1.23-24; Amos 8.4-10.
- e. Apostasy (abandonment of the LORD for other “gods”): Deut. 13.2, 6, 13; Exod. 32.1-10; Num. 25.1-5. (*Apostasy recurs as the signal cause of divine wrath.*)

Wrath is expressed principally in concrete, natural and historical catastrophes, such as famine, sickness, and pestilence, and may also be manifested in personal affliction. God’s wrath may be manifested through human agency (*e.g.*, the Assyrians).

Of particular importance is the need to distinguish between judgment which is temporal and judgment which is eternal. Thus, in the first chapter of *Romans* Paul refers to judgment which happens now, and which happens as an expression of God’s wrath:

The fundamental human sin is the refusal to honor God and give God thanks (1:21); consequently, God’s wrath takes the form of letting human idolatry run its own self-destructive course. [Sinful living], then is not a *provocation* of “the wrath of God” (Rom. 1:18); rather, it is a *consequence* of God’s decision to “give up” rebellious creatures to follow their own futile thinking and desires. The unrighteous behavior catalogued in Romans 1:26–31 is a list of *symptoms* ...⁷

⁷ R. B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 388 (emphases original).

Compare Romans 2.5; Eph. 5.6; Col. 5.6. Sinful behavior is both a provocation and a consequence of God's wrath, for the sinner has separated himself from God.

3. The Day of Wrath: The Old Testament prophets proclaimed a "day of the LORD" as a day of wrath for all who stood opposed to the divine plan of salvation. In the New Testament the drama of salvation is likewise to play itself out in one final "judgment of the great day" (Jude 6), with which history will end. This day is anticipated as "the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (Rom. 2.5, *cf.* Rev. 6.15). John the Baptizer refers to the "wrath which is to come" (Matt. 3.7), and the canon of all Scripture ends with a promise of "recompense, to repay every one for what he has done" (Rev. 22.12). The theme of a day of judgment recurs in the gospels (*e.g.*, Mark 10.15; Matt. 25.10; Luke 12.5, 47-48), and the epistles (*e.g.*, Rom. 5.9; 1 Cor. 5.5; 1 Thes. 1.10, etc.) At this day of wrath, men flee from the "face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb" (Rev. 6.15-16), with Jesus Christ Himself as the agent of God's wrath (Rev. 5.5, 6-14). This aspect of the lordship of Jesus is anticipated by Paul and in the fourth gospel, where John writes, "he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him" (John 3.36, *cf.* v. 18). Indeed, Luke records Jesus as saying that he has come to cast fire upon the earth, "and [I] would that it were already kindled!" (Luke 12.49).

As can be seen, the New Testament differs from the Old Testament on the subject of the termination of God's wrath. It takes a graver view of the wrath of God than do even the Old Testament prophets, and yet it reveals a hope of reconciliation with God. In other words, judgment is very real, but God's will is that humans be saved.

Judgment: Temporal judgment is seen in how the unrepentant sinner lives (Rom. 1.24), but what about eternal judgment? Does God's will to salvation remove the danger of damnation? Does God damn people to everlasting punishment, or do they each damn themselves by rejecting God and His offer of redemption and life-everlasting?

The fall from grace brought death upon all humans, and the sins to which we are naturally inclined as a result of the fall give to death its penal sting (Rom. 5.12, 6.23; 1 Cor. 15.21-22, 56). Each one of us, however, is subject to "particular judgment," *i.e.*, judgment as an individual on the basis of our individual spiritual state. That particular judgment occurs immediately following death is *not* revealed in Scripture (which describes judgment as general), but Jesus at least implies that some kind of separation occurs between the righteous and the wicked after their deaths but before the general judgment, when He speaks of the particular judgments of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16.19-31). It may, therefore, be reasonable to believe that immediately following earthly death each soul may become aware of the final destiny toward which he or she has fixed his or her course in earthly life.

It is certainly reasonable to believe that our Lord wills salvation for all who do not reject such light and grace as is given them. Thus, a person who through invincible ignorance has no knowledge of Jesus, and adheres thereby to a defective faith or a superstition, may still avoid damnation, but he or she is delivered from evil by the redemption offered by Jesus Christ, whether this is realized or not. The particular blessings promised to the Christian faithful are not promised to any except those who enter into the Christian covenant in this life (*but see* Romans 11; Israel's rejection is not final). Election to baptismal grace affords to its subjects possibilities of glory which are not afforded to those who are unbaptized, but it is not a necessary corollary that otherwise righteous non-Christians will not be afforded reward. The reward will be

different, but an otherwise righteous person has *not* rejected God, and thereby has not placed himself outside of God's plan for creation.

But what about those who do reject God? They may do this in what they believe and say and do (for belief and practice are not separable except imperfectly). They may live a life of such wickedness that their person becomes thereby conformed to a rejection of God, and in this manner can they then find that they are separated from God. They damn themselves. It is *de fide* (of the dogma of faith, here in the Creed) that when our Lord comes again He will render judgment upon all humans, and Jesus certainly distinguishes between hell and paradise. This judgment will be a definite event and not a continuing process (Acts 17.31, 24.25; Heb. 10.27; 2 Pet. 2.4). All will be judged at the same time (Matt. 25.32) and this will be to "the resurrection of life" or to "the resurrection of judgment" (John 5.27-29), but we will be judged by Jesus, one who by His full experience and knowledge of humanity is perfectly equipped to render judgment with sympathetic mercy as well as with justice (Heb. 4.15). The figure of the sheep and goats (Matt. 25.32) seems to suggest that at judgment all will have matured in their characters to a state beyond change, to a state which is manifest.

What about punishment? Scripture teaches that the wicked (those who have rejected God) are sent "into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25.41, 46; Mark 3.29; 16.16; John 5.29; Rom. 13.2; 2 Thes. 1.9, 2.12; Rev. 20.13-15; *cf.* Dan. 12.2). The term "fire" may be figurative, but the fact that this state is penal is clear. That hell is a particular place and not a state is certainly implied at Matt. 10.28 and 25.41, but the references to hell being "down" or "under the earth" in Eph. 4.9 and 2 Pet. 2.4 cannot be taken literally in the absence of other evidence.

The punishment of the damned is the loss of the beatific vision and actual pain (either of body, mind, or both), but it is impossible to define such punishment more closely, and attempts to so define this possible state have been the subject of unwarranted inference and exaggeration. Our Lord's descriptions are to be taken at full (if not face) value, but they are "relative" in the sense that Jesus described hell as it appears from His own heavenly and spiritual (perfect) standpoint. From this we may infer that to a human who has developed capacities of joy and sorrow on the basis of a mature and heavenly spirituality, hell would be as painful as fire and the "worm [that] does not turn". However, it is possible that the truly wicked, being so blunted as they are in a spiritual sense, may not find the state so agonizing. No creature can exist unless his life is at least endurable, and it is sensible to believe that even in hell God bestows such good as can in fact be received, for even hell is a part of Creation. God's mercy is infinite, and hell can perhaps be thought of, then, as the best place possible for those who have condemned themselves to this existence. To a faithful Christian, the loss of attainment to heavenly joy would indeed be "fire" and "worm," but it can at least be argued that to one in hell the joys of heaven would be unendurable (Isa. 6.5-7),⁸ and that hell is thus a dispensation of mercy as well as justice.

It is possible that only a minority of humans will attain to heavenly glory, but it does not at all follow that the rest, the bulk of humanity, will suffer everlasting punishment. The only ones for whom consignment to hell is revealed are those who wittingly and wilfully reject the way to heaven.

Life-everlasting: Life-everlasting consists of open, personal relations with God in and through Jesus Christ. On these relations depend the joys of heaven. Our life is actualized in relation, and as beings created for God, this relation reaches its full actualization and joy by being centered in Him (John 17.3). This everlasting life is potentially gained and in part

⁸ Cf. the interlude "Don Juan in Hell" in G. B. Shaw's play *Man and Superman*.

actualized in this world through our baptismal incorporation into the Body of Christ, which initiates this life in us, and only obstinate sin can stifle this life. God has created us in His image and likeness, and calls us His own. It is only by willing that we be our own only, by rejecting and combating God's will, that we can lose the union with Him for which He gave His only Son.