

Struggling with Judgement

Introduction to the e-booklet

This little booklet is a written version of the *Burning Heart* film series *Struggling with Judgement*. It was consciously and deliberately written for film, and we still think that the content works best when watched – but some people prefer to read, and others like to be able quickly read back over what they've watched, so we've made it available in a written form for those who want it. If that includes you - we hope and pray that you find it helpful, and that it draws you closer to God.

We have also included the study guides for each film/chapter at the end of the relevant chapters below. The guides were designed to accompany the series, and are particularly designed as discussion starters for small groups watching or using the material in their meetings. We wanted to include them here, so that all are materials in this series are available in written form in one place.

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Contents

<i>Chapter 1 – Starting the Struggle</i>	<i>page 3</i>
<i>Study Guide</i>	<i>page 11</i>
<i>Chapter 2 – Fixing what is Broken</i>	<i>page 12</i>
<i>Study Guide</i>	<i>page 19</i>
<i>Chapter 3 – An Antidote to Poison</i>	<i>page 20</i>
<i>Study Guide</i>	<i>page 28</i>
<i>Chapter 4 – Getting Emotional</i>	<i>page 29</i>
<i>Study Guide</i>	<i>page 37</i>
<i>Chapter 5 – The Cross</i>	<i>page 38</i>
<i>Study Guide</i>	<i>page 45</i>
<i>Chapter 6 – The End</i>	<i>page 46</i>
<i>Study Guide</i>	<i>page 55</i>
<i>Explore More – recommended reading and resources</i>	<i>page 56</i>

Chapter 1

Starting the struggle

Worship and judgement

For many of us, sung worship is right at the heart of our discipleship and relationship with God. We worship God for his love, his power, his forgiveness, for what Jesus has done for us, and lots more. But one thing we never seem to worship God for is his judgement. In fact, it might strike you as odd even to mention that – surely no-one worships God for his judgement?

Strange as it may seem though, our failure to worship God for his judgement exposes a problem. We worship God because he is worthy of our worship. We believe that he's good and perfect in every way and that there is nothing wrong or dark in him. That means that everything about him is worth worshipping. The problem is that the Bible has a lot to say about judgement, and it tells us that God is a God who judges.

Jesus the Judge?

In Matthew 25 Jesus tells a parable about final judgement at the end of time. He describes himself as a judge separating righteous people from the rest like a shepherd separating his sheep from goats. He finishes with the words: “*then they [the goats] will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.*”¹

For most of us the idea that Jesus would talk of himself as a judge is a difficult and shocking idea to get our heads around. How do we reconcile that with everything else we know about Jesus – such as his love, his

¹ Matthew 25v46

Struggling with Judgement

compassion, or his forgiveness? How could a God of love and grace also be a God of judgement?

That question is really what this booklet is all about. I've called it *Struggling with Judgement* because I find this really hard – I struggle with it. That means that this booklet isn't about waving my finger at you, or telling you that you're rubbish, or anything like that. It's about going on a journey together to find out how God, who we know is good and loving, could also be a God of judgement.

As we journey together, my prayer is that we will begin to understand how God's judgement can actually be OK, or even something positive – part of his good pleasing and perfect will. Perhaps by the end we might even get our guitars out and start worshipping God for his judgement!

Starting the Journey

I don't think I'm quite there yet, but I came across a Psalm a couple of years ago that really encouraged me on this journey – Psalm 98. The final few verses are what caught my attention:

*Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
make music to the LORD with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn —
shout for joy before the LORD, the King.*

*Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.
Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;
let them sing before the LORD,
for he comes to judge the earth.*

Struggling with Judgement

*He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.²*

This is one of the most joyful and exuberant Psalms there is. It paints quite a picture, with rivers clapping their hands and mountains singing for joy. At the end of it all though, the thing the Psalmist is worshipping God for is his judgement.

When I first realised that it was a bit of a shock! But it also really encouraged me – it encouraged me that it *is* possible to worship God for his judgement. That hinted that maybe there was something I just wasn't getting. Maybe there was something here that I didn't understand, that we might all be missing.

Shaphat - Judgement

As I've dug around a bit into what the Bible has to say about judgement, I think that I've discovered that there *is* more here than I realised. There is an answer to the question 'why?' Why does God judge?

It really starts with the word – judgement. In English we tend to see judgement as a purely negative word – we think of things like punishment, vengeance, and retribution. In the Bible though, judgement is much bigger than that – and crucially, much more positive than that.

The Hebrew word for judgement is שָׁפַט (*shaphat*). While punishment can be part of it, it is primarily about something positive. Judgement is about putting things right, restoring them to the way they should be. It is about making the world a better place. In some ways, this word is maybe closer to the English word "justice."

One Hebrew dictionary sums it up like this:

² *Psalm 98v4-9*

“shaphat describes a range of actions that restore or preserve order in society, so that justice, especially social justice, is guaranteed...it can be translated as rule, govern...deliver, rescue, or judge.”³

As I read that, I immediately find myself thinking of another Biblical theme that we tend to be a whole lot keener on – Salvation.

Where are the judges?

One Biblical book that can confuse people is Judges. When we read it lots of us wonder where all the judges went to. We assume that the title is all about judges in law courts, ruling on cases, handing down sentences, and so on, but there don't seem to be any of them in the book at all. Instead, there's a parade of charismatic heroes – men like Gideon, and women like Deborah, who God uses to rescue and deliver the people of Israel from oppression by their enemies.

Surprisingly though, *that* is what the Bible means by a judge. The crazy and dramatic stories of how they rescue the Israelites from their enemies are all examples of what the Bible thinks of as judgement - putting things right, establishing justice, restoring life to the way it should be. All of which seems much better than what we normally think of when we think of judgement!

There are still some snags though. For Old Testament Israelites the book of Judges would have been a great read, full of good news. It tells wonderful stories of salvation and deliverance. For the Ammonites, Midianites, or Philistines though, it is much less positive. In fact, for them, these stories are a catalogue of defeat and disaster.

³ *Richard Schultz* in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. *Willem A. Van Gemeren*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Mi. 1997. Vol 4, p. 214

Negative as well as positive

While the Bible speaks of judgement and salvation together, and judgement always has a positive element...there is still the negative. Punishment and pain do seem inextricably linked with judgement.

A lot of what we read about judgement in the Bible is extraordinarily difficult. Stories of the fall of Jerusalem and the exile in the Old Testament can be horrible to read, and I find the depth and intensity of the suffering described in books like Lamentations or Ezekiel almost unbearably heart-breaking.

Even when we turn to the New Testament, there are some difficult things. The words of Jesus I mentioned earlier about eternal punishment, or some of the visions of judgement in Revelation, can be very hard to read.

I think that it is important to realise though that these passages of judgement aren't about a God who *wants* to destroy. In fact, quite the opposite. There's a beautiful verse in 2 Peter, which describes how God "*does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants all to turn away from their sins*"⁴

The destruction and suffering that are wound up with judgement is something that God longs to save us from - the Bible is full of moments in which God cries out to his people and pleads with us to repent and turn back to him, so that we might live. So that we might *not* fall under his judgement.

Which all raises the question; why then does God judge? Or perhaps more specifically; why does the Bible suggest that judgement and salvation are connected? Why can't we have heaven without hell, love without punishment, salvation without judgement?

Suffering and Judgement

⁴ 2 Peter 3v9 (GNB)

Struggling with Judgement

As a pastor I often find myself talking to people about the things they struggle with when it comes to faith. This theme of judgement is a big one, but probably the issue that people struggle with more than any other is suffering. Why does God allow suffering?

We look around at the world, and we see so much suffering and heartache. We see the violence and horrors of war or famine in our newsfeeds. Even in our own lives each of us has plenty to struggle with, and ultimately all of us die. As we think about all these things something deep within us cries out ‘*why?*’ It is as though we know we were created for something better – that things shouldn’t be like this.

When we pick up the Bible we find that same longing for a world without pain and suffering. If you read the Psalms or Lamentations you find countless moments of darkness and struggle, as people cry out to God, ‘why?’, ‘how long?’ ‘help me’, or ‘hear me!’

Alongside those pains and struggles though, there’s also a realisation that suffering doesn’t just happen. Where does suffering come from? Tragically, the answer is...us.

At the root of so much of the pain and suffering of the world is us – the things we do, our mistakes and our wrongs, what the Bible calls ‘sin.’ Sometimes that can be direct and obvious, such as in the suffering that comes out of violence or dishonesty. More often though it is indirect – when we suffer because of what other people have done, or because we live in a broken world in which injustice or accidents are just part of life. There may not be any specific link between my sins and my suffering – but on a bigger level sin and suffering are bound up together. Sin is the root and cause of almost all our suffering and pain.

That all means if God is going to stop suffering, then he also has to stop sin – and that brings us back to judgement. *That* is what judgement is all about. Judgement is the punishment and ending of sin.

We long for a world in which pain and suffering are no more – for the paradise that we read about at the end of the Bible, in which there is “*no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain.*”⁵ That is only possible though if God judges, and the problem and pain of sin is dealt with first.

Do we really deserve judgement?

I think that for many of us this is a difficult message to hear, because we don’t tend to think that our sin is that big a deal. Most people I know would be happy with the idea of Hitler, Stalin or Pol Pot facing judgement – in fact many of us would demand it of God. What we can’t get our head around is that *we* might also deserve to be judged. Yet the Bible makes it very clear that we do deserve judgement – that “*there is no-one righteous not even one.*”⁶

Much of the rest of this series will be wrestling with this central issue – why *does* my sin matter so much? And we will be looking at some images the Bible uses to show us why sin *is* such a big deal.

An alternative to suffering and judgement?

I want to finish this chapter on a different note though, reflecting again on that tension between suffering and judgement. Through much of the Old Testament there seems to be an awful choice. Would we have a world without judgement? If so, we must accept suffering. Or would we have a world without suffering? If so, then we must face judgement.

Gloriously though, as we turn to the New Testament a third choice is made possible – the way of redemption. This is the way of forgiveness, the way of the cross.

⁵ Revelation 21v4

⁶ Romans 3v10

Struggling with Judgement

At the cross Jesus takes onto himself the judgement of the world. He takes on himself the judgement *I* deserve and makes it possible for me to be both judged *and* forgiven.

We often say that the cross is the ultimate expression of God's love. What we easily miss is that it is also the ultimate expression of his judgement. You cannot speak of what the Bible has to say about judgement without speaking of the cross.

We saw earlier that God's judgement is all about setting the world to rights, putting it back to the way it should be, about making the world a better place....in fact, making the world the *best* possible place. But then we also saw how with that comes the pain and punishment of dealing with sin.

The wonderful news of the cross is that God offers *us* all the good stuff – salvation, paradise, eternal life – but then he takes all the bad stuff on himself, so we don't have to. That is the most amazing news in the world!

Starting the Journey – Study Guide

- How do you react to the idea of God’s judgement?
- *Read Psalm 98:4-9*
 - Does it surprise you that the Psalmist worships God for his judgement?
- Have you ever thought that judgement might have a positive dimension?
- Is judgement necessary to end suffering?
- “The cross is the ultimate expression of God’s judgement” – what do you think?

Chapter 2

Fixing what is Broken

Different reactions to judgement

I used to live and be the Pastor of a church in the City of London. Just across the road from our church was London's most famous law court – the “Old Bailey.” Many of Britain's most serious or high-profile crimes end up at the Old Bailey, from phone-hacking to murder or terrorism. That meant that our area always seemed to be on the news, as camera-crews descended on whichever high-profile case was in the spotlight at any moment.

On top of the court is a famous statue of justice. In the statue, she holds a set of scales in one hand to show that justice is fair, but in the other she holds the sword of judgement. When we hear about the sort of cases that end up at the Old Bailey something within us cries out for justice – for judgement. If a murderer walks free, or a terrorist is given too short a sentence, we are outraged – we want people to bear the responsibility for such crimes.

In most other areas of life and culture we have a very different reaction to judgement, in fact it's almost become a dirty word. Judgement seems to stand for everything we don't want to be. The words of the age are love or tolerance, and judgement seems harsh and unreasonable. The Dalai Lama probably spoke for most people today when he said that “love is the absence of judgement.”

As we turn to the Bible though, we find a very different vision – both of love, and of the place of judgement. Again and again we are told both that God is love, and also that God is a God of judgement. That is a combination that most people, including most Christians (including me), find hard. How is that possible? How could God be both love and judge?

I found that living next door to the Old Bailey gave me a helpful new perspective on those questions. It showed me that actually we think differently about judgement in different contexts. When I looked across the road to the Old Bailey each morning, I would be reminded that actually most of us do believe in judgement some of the time.

What's the real issue?

The key difference between those moments and the rest of life is that most of the time we don't think that there is anything to judge. We know we're not perfect, but the things we do wrong just don't seem that big a deal. We try to live a good life, not to hurt people, and to follow some form of moral code – surely that's enough? Surely, *we* don't deserve to be judged.

When we think of it like that the issue is not actually about judgement – it's about sin. The Bible tells us in Romans 3 that “*all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*”, and that that means all of us deserve judgement.⁷ If we want to get our minds and hearts around judgement, that is what we need to work through.

In this chapter, and the two that follow it, we are going to spend some time reflecting on some of the images and ideas that the Bible gives us to help us grasp what is really going on with sin.

Fixing what is broken

In the last chapter we reflected on how in the Bible judgement always has a positive angle. Judgement is about putting things right, about fixing things.

⁷ Romans 3v23

That draws me to a helpful illustration that most of us will be familiar with – a garage. When a car breaks down, we take it in to be fixed, and until the brakes are sorted or the engine is repaired the car simply won't work – or worse it will be dangerous. That image of something that is broken is one that the Bible uses to describe our sin. In fact, the Hebrew word for righteousness – *ṭṣedeq* (tse-deq) can actually be used of objects or things that are working as they should be. That means that if we are not righteous, we are literally broken.⁸

Back to Genesis

To show what that means I want us to look at one of the most brilliant exposes of sin in the Bible - the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3.

It's a controversial passage, and most of the time when we talk about it, our focus is all about whether and how it is true. Some Christians view it as a parable or paradigm of human sin and fallenness, while others believe that it is historically true. Both groups believe that it is true, simply in different ways. I am conscious that if I pick one viewpoint here our whole discussion will become focused on that. Fortunately, what Genesis 3 reveals about the nature and consequences of sin stands whichever viewpoint we take – so I can sidestep the controversy!

Genesis 3 is a famous story, and most people could probably sketch out a broad outline of what happens. Adam and Eve sin by disobeying God and eating fruit from the tree that they have been told not to eat. God finds out and then he punishes them for it by throwing them out of the garden and cursing them and all their descendants.

When you sum it up like that it seems outrageously harsh. Adam and Eve commit this seemingly fairly minor transgression, but then God goes

⁸ For those who would like to explore this issue further, I would strongly recommend Christopher J. H. Wright's excellent book *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (IVP, 2004), especially chapter 8.

nuclear with the punishment options. We wonder, why can't God just forgive them? Why doesn't he give them a second chance? Why not just let it go?

In some ways those questions and that reaction sum up our whole attitude to sin and judgement. The whole thing seems an overreaction, and also totally out of character with the God of love and forgiveness we read about elsewhere in scripture.

Re-reading the story

But that reaction is based on a misreading of the account in Genesis 3. My summary of the story may be familiar to most of us – but it also misses out one of the most important parts of the story. It misses out the bit between Adam and Eve's sin and God's punishment. Look at Genesis 3v7-12:

the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so, they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so, I hid."

And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

The man said, "The woman you put here with me —she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

I don't know if you spotted it, but before God re-enters the story, everything has already gone disastrously wrong. Whatever options there are

at this point, pretending that nothing has happened, or just carrying on as before is no longer possible.

Broken relationships in Paradise

Let me unpack that. At the heart of the vision of life in these chapters is relationship – relationship between us and God, and relationships with each another, in this case Adam and Eve. That obviously also resonates with the rest of scripture – the two greatest commandments are to love God, and to love our neighbour.⁹

So far in the story, God hasn't actually reacted to what Adam and Eve have done at all, beyond asking a simple question. There's been no curse, no punishment, no judgement - but those core relationships have already been destroyed.

It all seems to start with Adam and Eve's relationship with each other. We read that *'the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realised that they were naked.'* Physically nothing's changed, and they must've known before that they weren't wearing any clothes. Somehow though, they realise their nakedness in a new way. There's a new self-consciousness and a new sense of shame and vulnerability with each other. They react by stitching together some fig-leaves and trying to cover up, trying to put up barriers between them.

As we continue, we discover that this isn't just some simple misunderstanding. Adam and Eve no longer trust each other, and it quickly becomes clear why. When God asks Adam what is going on, he immediately tries to shift the blame onto Eve. There's a betrayal as he tries to wriggle out of any responsibility and leave her to face the consequences on her own. This perfect human relationship is now broken and mired in shame, blame and recrimination.

⁹ See Mark 12v29-31

Struggling with Judgement

It's not just that relationship that goes wrong – Adam and Eve's relationship with God is also destroyed in that one moment of sin. There's a tragic beauty to the description of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. It tells of a time when our relationship with God was normal, simple, and natural.

In verse 8 we discover that God is still there, walking in the garden in the cool of the day – but Adam and Eve can no longer join him. We read that '*they hid from the LORD God.*' Their only experience of life has been of God's blessings, and yet now they are afraid of him, cringing and ashamed in the shadows.

The two relationships which are at the heart of this vision of paradise, our relationships with God and each other, are now irretrievably broken. Adam and Eve, are no longer the perfect, noble, loving people they were created to be. Instead, they are fearful, ashamed and hypocritical, quick to blame and slow to trust. That is what our sin does to us. It breaks us, smudging and destroying what we were designed to be.

Actually, it is even worse than that, because our sin overflows and spills out onto those around us. Adam and Eve are both also broken and impacted by each other's sin.

So often we want to ignore sin, but I think that's because we don't realise what we've lost. My sin is what stops me (and stops you) from enjoying perfection in paradise. We were designed for a life of flourishing and rejoicing at every turn. All the bitterness, pain and sorrow of this grey world we live in are alien to us. And they are all ultimately caused by sin. That means that this is vast – and that sin really is a huge deal.

God's reaction

So, what does God do? The immediate answer is a message of judgement and it's a difficult message to hear. Adam and Eve are cast out

of the garden. They are subjected to pain and frustration and they will experience death.

Yet even in the midst of this heavy word there is also a message of hope. It was the serpent (the Devil) who tempted them to sin, and God promise him that the seed of the woman will one day crush his head. In that promise we catch the first tantalising glimpse of salvation, of Jesus.

I don't think that the judgement and banishment from Eden is simply an arbitrary or vindictive punishment. It limits the reach and spread of the poison, but it is also the beginning of God's plan for salvation and redemption and restoration - the story and plan of the Bible.

This story of salvation a long story, and it's marred and disfigured by the ruinous consequences of our sin. It finishes once more in paradise though – this time not in a garden, but in a City. It will be a paradise unmarked by death or mourning or crying or pain, and in which we can know God in our midst. It will be a place in which life will at last be all that we long for – perfect, full and overflowing with blessings and joy. You can read about it in Revelation 21 and 22 – and its glorious!

Wonderfully, it is a paradise that can include us. Jesus took the full horror of our sin on himself at the cross and then rose victorious the other side. Because of that, I can be forgiven and restored. That means that even though I am broken and sinful and unworthy, I can be part of God's paradise. I can know God.

Fixing what is Broken – Study Guide

- Why do we find the idea of judgement so hard to accept?
- What is your understanding of sin?
- *Read Genesis 3v7-12*
 - How has Adam and Eve's sin left them broken?
 - Does that help you to understand your own sin better?
- How has sin impacted your life?
- How do you feel about the idea of salvation as being fixed?
- Does reflecting on sin and judgement help you understand the cross better?

Chapter 3

An antidote to poison

Shakespearean intrigue

One of the highlights of London in summer is the chance to visit the Globe theatre. Today's Globe is a reconstruction of the theatre where Shakespeare worked and premiered many of his plays. It's a raucous and interactive take on Shakespeare, which is surprisingly fun!

Like many a great writer, Shakespeare had a love of intrigue and murder (at least in his plays!). One of his favourite plot twists was poison. Hamlet's Dad has it poured in his ear, Romeo drinks it in despair, and Cleopatra kills herself with the bite of a poisonous snake. Poison is something small, but deadly, as Shakespeare puts it:

“swift as quicksilver it courses through
the natural gates and alleys of the body
and with sudden vigour does posset
and curd...the blood”¹⁰

the poison of sin

That image of a poison that spreads and kills is one of the pictures that the Bible uses to describe sin. It's beautifully put in Deuteronomy 29, as Moses warns the people against turning away from God:

“Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the LORD our God to go and worship the gods of

¹⁰ Hamlet Act 1, Scene 5

those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison.”¹¹

This image of sin as poison is one that I find really helpful. It helps me to get my head around why sin matters so much more than we often realise. The idea of judgement is something that most of us struggle with and shy away from. One key reason for that is that we don't really get why sin is such a problem. We know we're not perfect, but most of the things that we do wrong just don't seem that big a deal to us. That means that the punishments and judgement we read about in the Bible seem a bit much. Why can't God just forgive us and let it go?

This image of poison gives us one answer to that question (and we looked at another in the last chapter). Poison is not something you can ignore and just let go. However small and innocuous it may seem to begin with, if left unchecked it spreads and festers until it kills you.

What Moses is saying in this verse is that's basically what sin is like. It may look small and insignificant, but if we leave it unchecked it will spread and fester until it destroys us. Worse, it doesn't just destroy *us* – it spreads and destroys those around us.

We see that in all kinds of little ways every day: the cross word that escalates into an argument, and ends in the breakdown of a friendship or working relationship; the little white lie that soon gets out of control and ends up hurting those we love; or the moment of carelessness that causes an injury for someone else. And the Bible makes it clear it's not just in the details like those that our sin acts like poison – it's also true on the large scale...

Sin in the book of Judges

¹¹ Deuteronomy 29v18

The Biblical book of Judges illustrates this particularly well. Judges is quite an ambiguous book. It's best known for the stories of heroes (or judges) who rescue the Israelites from a series of disasters and enemies. Alongside the good news though is a general picture of growing sin. The book presents a society spiralling out of control, with each successive cycle worse than the last.

The writer gives us an overview of what is to come at the start, in Judges 2, and as he does he says:

*“when [each] judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods...they refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways”*¹²

The root of the problem is highlighted as something *we* might view as relatively minor – the people's decision to ignore God and follow their own ideas about life. The verdict of the whole book is summed up in its final words *“everyone did as they saw fit”* – literally: *“everyone did what was right in their own eyes.”*¹³

This issue of turning away from God, is actually the same issue that Moses highlights as a bitter poison in the verse from Deuteronomy we explored above.

Turning away from God is not something we tend to view as that big an issue – in fact if anything, most people today would probably see it is a positive. How often are we told to “be true to yourself”?

What makes the comments in the book of Judges so punchy though, is that the writer sketches out a picture of what happens when we stop paying attention to God. The book finishes with two long stories that are designed to sum up just how bad things had become.

¹² Judges 2v19

¹³ Judges 21v25

An awful ending

I find the final story particularly shocking and difficult to read. It starts slowly in chapter 19, with the story of a broken romance and various little issues and problems that just begin to flag up that something is wrong.

Things then flare up horribly with a gang-rape, murder and cover up. That in turn escalates into a civil war which leads to the death of 25,000 people. Then just when you thought the whole sorry tale was over, the leaders of the nation plot to kidnap 400 young women and force them into marriage with the survivors of the civil war. It's an *awful* story!

So, when the writer finishes this story and then immediately sums up the whole situation by explaining that in those days "*everyone did as they saw fit,*" there's not a lot of doubt that that is *not* meant to be a good thing!

Recognising the source of our blessings

Thankfully our society isn't as bad as that. That story actually reminds me that there is so much about my life today that is fantastic. I think of my friends and family, my health, my job, being in a free and democratic society, and lot's more. It's a long list of blessings!

We are reminded in the Bible that actually all those good things ultimately come from God. As Paul puts it in 1 Timothy 6, God "*richly provides us with all things to enjoy.*"¹⁴

These are blessings that can be enjoyed by everyone. They're not just for Christians, and there's loads of wonderful people I come across who don't follow Jesus.

¹⁴ 1 Tim 6v17

Yet whether we realise it or not, as James chapter 1 puts it: “*every good and perfect gift is from above.*”¹⁵ God is the source of every blessing, every good thing in life, every laugh and every smile.

What that also means is that to turn away from God, is to turn away from the source of every blessing in life. At first that may not seem like a big deal. We still get to enjoy all those blessings, and the smiles and laughter continue, just without God in the picture. What’s wrong with that?

The problem is that however small it may seem at first, that’s never the end. That failure to recognise God, the sin, *is* a poison. It may start small, it may be slow acting, we may not notice it to begin with - but slowly and surely it spreads and grows and destroys.

Living broken lives

Despite all the blessings around us, each of us also knows the pain and frustration of a world that is broken and out of sync. That’s not just true out there – if we’re honest, most of us would admit that there’s also plenty wrong in each of us.

There’s an old sermon illustration I love. Imagine that I had got hold of a short film of your life, except this film isn’t the highlights, it’s the low-lights. It chronicles all your worst moments, all your worst actions and all your worst thoughts. What would you do to stop me posting that film on YouTube? For me, the answer is ‘almost anything’ – I know that there’s so much wrong and out of sync in *my* life.

The root and foundation of that, and of everything else that’s wrong and hurting in our world...is sin.

¹⁵ James 1v17

Struggling with Judgement

That is why Moses describes it as such a bitter poison – and *that* is why the Bible makes such a big deal about sin.

God's response

What does God do about that? Suddenly, I don't want the answer to be 'nothing.' I want a world that is free from all that junk. I long for a life where there is no longer any death or mourning or crying or pain, and a time when sin and suffering are just a memory. So, what is God going to do about it? How can God get rid of the poison of my sin?

The answer is judgement. Judgement is the antidote, the cure, to sin. When God judges he cuts out the rot and poison of our sin, and set things back to the way they should be.

A cure for cancer

An image that helps me get my head around this is cancer. My old home in London was just across the road from St. Bart's hospital, one of the oldest and best hospitals in Britain. One of the things Barts is famous for is its oncology department – treating cancer.

Most of the treatments for cancer are fairly severe and painful, things like surgery, chemotherapy or radiotherapy. There are usually significant and painful side effects. So, why do we use them? Of course, the answer is obvious – we use them because we want to cure the cancer. Cancer is so serious that we are willing to endure almost anything if it will cure us.

In some ways, judgement is like a cure for cancer. It is serious, and painful, and severe. However, it is also necessary. In fact, it is the only answer, the only cure, to our sin.

Difficult reading

Struggling with Judgement

In the Bible that judgement comes in various different forms. We need to be honest that many of those forms make difficult and hard reading. When we read of judgement on a specific nation or generation it can be hard to read. That is even more true when we read of final judgement. While on one level, final judgement is a moment when all that is wrong in this world will be destroyed and everything put right, it also a moment when some people will end up on the wrong side of God's judgement eternally. That is something we will look into in more depth later in this booklet.

Salvation through judgement

Yet judgement is not the Bible's last word. Final judgement comes in Revelation 20 – yet Revelation 21 and 22 speak of salvation. They share an offer to everyone: *“let anyone who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.”*¹⁶

That offer is made possible though, because of what in many is the most important moment of judgement in the whole Bible; the cross. People often say that the cross is the ultimate expression of God's love, and it is. Yet the cross is also the ultimate expression of God's judgement, because at the cross Jesus takes all our sin onto himself.

All that is wrong and broken and twisted in me is put onto Jesus and is judged in him at the cross. As he dies, all that is wrong in me dies. In fact, the picture is even stronger than that – when Jesus died, *I* died. Paul writes in Galatians 2:

“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me”

We die with Jesus, and all that is wrong in us dies with him. But then we also rise again with him and when we do, the poison is gone. I don't fully

¹⁶ Revelation 22v17

understand how this is possible, but at the cross we are cleansed and set free from the poison of our sin.

For now, the fullness of all this is still to come. When Jesus returns and the dead are raised, in that moment we will experience the fullness of what Jesus has done for us on the cross, and we will be changed and made perfect at last.

That is what the cross is all about – judging all that is wrong and broken in us, destroying it, drawing out the poison, and yet not destroying us. Instead, rather than destroying us Jesus saves us at the cross. It is the cure for cancer that destroys the cancer, but let's the person live, cured and free forever.

That is a cure that carries with it not just hope for me but hope for the world. It brings the promise of a *world* free from the poison and brokenness of sin, a world in which there truly is “*no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*”¹⁷

¹⁷ Revelation 21v4

An Antidote to Poison – Study Guide

- Does the image of poison help you understand sin better?
- Read *Judges 2v10-16 and 21v25 (cf. Deuteronomy 29v18)*
 - why is turning away from God so disastrous?
- “every good and perfect gift comes from above” (James 1v17) How is this true?
- Does understanding sin better change the way that you think about judgement?
- How does the image of the cross as a cure for poison help you understand it better?

Chapter 4

Getting Emotional

Romance and Emotions

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is probably the most famous romantic novel of all time. I first came across it as a teenager, when I was made to read it for my English Literature class, and discovered to my surprise that I really enjoyed it!

Part of the genius of the book is the way in which Austen develops one of the key characters – Mr. Darcy. Our first impression is of a 'proud and disagreeable man.' Over time though that changes completely, as the heroine (Lizzy Bennet) both discovers more about him, and gradually falls in love with him.

The book skilfully weaves together both new information and changing emotions. As it does, it carries us along, and most people are Darcy fans (or more!) by the end.

Engaging our emotions

We often think that our reactions to things are mainly driven by facts and information, but we are also very influenced by our emotions. People fall for Darcy not just because they learn lots about him, they also get carried along on Lizzy Bennett's emotional journey. As she changes her mind and heart about him – so do we!

Usually we get it right with our emotions, but from time to time we don't – like with everyone's first impressions of Mr. Darcy. In those situations, we need to change.

In this book, we are wrestling with the Biblical theme of judgement – how can a God of love and compassion also be a God of judgement? It’s a question most of us probably struggle with.

When we try and answer this question we usually focus just on the facts and the arguments. That is important, and it is the focus of the other chapters in this book. In this chapter though I want us to grapple with our emotional reactions to God’s judgement.

For most of us, even if we can get our heads and minds around God’s judgement, we struggle to get our hearts around it. There is something fairly deep within us on an emotional level that just recoils at the thought of judgement.

God’s struggle with judgement

On one level that’s actually a good thing, as it reflects the heart of God. There’s a beautiful passage in Luke’s gospel when Jesus is approaching Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and as he does, he stops and weeps over the City. He knows, and actually prophesies, that judgement is coming for Jerusalem because of their rejection of him – and yet that breaks his heart. He cries out: *‘if you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace!’*¹⁸

Again and again in the Bible we are told that God longs for our salvation, not for our judgement. In some ways that’s the whole message of the Bible. It is the reason why Jesus came and it is what the cross is all about. God longs to save us and wants to rescue us from judgement. God loves us so much that he died to forgive us.

And yet there is still judgement. Jesus still prophesies against Jerusalem, and we still struggle to understand “why?” Why must there be judgement?

¹⁸ Luke 19v42

In this moment though, that's not really a question for me. Rather than an intellectual thing, it's a gut reaction. I don't get it – deep down it doesn't seem right.

A shocking parable

I want to take you to a passage that has really helped me with this – it's a story or parable that's found in Ezekiel 23, and it's really engaged my heart on this. It's unusual, surprising and shocking – even offensive. It takes us into a world that we don't often mention or think about in church. It's the world of the brothel and the prostitute, crude, vulgar and offensive.

The passage is a parable about the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and it compares them to two sisters who grow up to become prostitutes. This isn't a story of victims or exploitation or sex trafficking, as so many of the stories of prostitution in our time are. These two sisters are loved and cherished and giving everything that they could want, and yet they choose to become prostitutes.

Take some time to read this difficult passage:

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, there were two women, daughters of the same mother. They became prostitutes in Egypt, engaging in prostitution from their youth. In that land their breasts were fondled and their virgin bosoms caressed. The older was named Oholah, and her sister was Obolibab. They were mine and gave birth to sons and daughters. Oholah is Samaria, and Obolibab is Jerusalem.

"Oholah engaged in prostitution while she was still mine; and she lusted after her lovers, the Assyrians —warriors clothed in blue, governors and commanders, all of them handsome young men, and mounted horsemen. She gave herself as a prostitute to all the elite of the Assyrians and defiled herself with all the idols of everyone she lusted after. She did not give up the prostitution she began in Egypt,

when during her youth men slept with her, caressed her virgin bosom and poured out their lust on her.

“Therefore I delivered her into the hands of her lovers, the Assyrians, for whom she lusted. They stripped her naked, took away her sons and daughters and killed her with the sword. She became a byword among women, and punishment was inflicted on her.

“Her sister Oholibah saw this, yet in her lust and prostitution she was more depraved than her sister. She too lusted after the Assyrians—governors and commanders, warriors in full dress, mounted horsemen, all handsome young men. I saw that she too defiled herself; both of them went the same way.

“But she carried her prostitution still further. She saw men portrayed on a wall, figures of Chaldeans portrayed in red, with belts around their waists and flowing turbans on their heads; all of them looked like Babylonian chariot officers, natives of Chaldea. As soon as she saw them, she lusted after them and sent messengers to them in Chaldea. Then the Babylonians came to her, to the bed of love, and in their lust they defiled her. After she had been defiled by them, she turned away from them in disgust. When she carried on her prostitution openly and exposed her naked body, I turned away from her in disgust, just as I had turned away from her sister. Yet she became more and more promiscuous as she recalled the days of her youth, when she was a prostitute in Egypt. There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses. So you longed for the lewdness of your youth, when in Egypt your bosom was caressed and your young breasts fondled.

“Therefore, Oholibah, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will stir up your lovers against you, those you turned away from in disgust, and I will bring them against you from every side — the Babylonians and all the Chaldeans, the men of Pekod and Shoa and Koa, and all the Assyrians with them, handsome young men, all of them governors and commanders, chariot officers and men of high rank, all mounted on horses. They will come against you with weapons, chariots and wagons and with a throng of people; they will take up positions against you on every side with large and small shields and with helmets. I will

turn you over to them for punishment, and they will punish you according to their standards. I will direct my jealous anger against you, and they will deal with you in fury. They will cut off your noses and your ears, and those of you who are left will fall by the sword. They will take away your sons and daughters, and those of you who are left will be consumed by fire. They will also strip you of your clothes and take your fine jewelry. So I will put a stop to the lewdness and prostitution you began in Egypt. You will not look on these things with longing or remember Egypt anymore.

“For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am about to deliver you into the hands of those you hate, to those you turned away from in disgust. They will deal with you in hatred and take away everything you have worked for. They will leave you stark naked, and the shame of your prostitution will be exposed. Your lewdness and promiscuity have brought this on you, because you lusted after the nations and defiled yourself with their idols. You have gone the way of your sister; so I will put her cup into your hand.

“This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

*“You will drink your sister’s cup,
a cup large and deep;
it will bring scorn and derision,
for it holds so much.
You will be filled with drunkenness and sorrow,
the cup of ruin and desolation,
the cup of your sister Samaria.
You will drink it and drain it dry
and chew on its pieces—
and you will tear your breasts.*

I have spoken, declares the Sovereign LORD.

“Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Since you have forgotten me and turned your back on me, you must bear the consequences of your lewdness and prostitution.”

Responding to the parable

Wow!

What are we supposed to do with that? I once said to someone, if that passage wasn't in the Bible, I wouldn't allow it to be read out in our church. I find it deeply shocking, quite offensive, and it really upsets me to find it in the Bible. And that is the whole point.

This is meant to be offensive and crude. It's designed to upset you, to stir up your emotions and even your anger. God is trying to show us in our hearts and emotions how he feels about our sin. He takes the most scandalous image of sin and sex in that culture – and he says: 'that's what you're like,' that's what we're like.

Of course, this was directed against the Old Testament Israelites, and it's their sin that is in the cross hairs. Yet I think we are supposed to hear the force of that punch too. It isn't just them and their sin that makes God feel like that – this is how God feels about all our sin as well.

In some ways things are a little different today, perhaps particularly in the ways that people trafficking, and exploitation mean that many prostitutes are among the great victims of our society.

I think that there is still enough in that image that resonates with us though. There is still enough to make us feel those emotions, to feel the sense of sexual sin, to feel the shame, the stigma, and the shock. We still feel outraged at the comparison, and ask horrified – is that how God feels about my sin? Difficult as it is to hear, we need to accept that the answer is 'yes.'

Understanding the heart of God

That's hard to take, but if we can, it can change and transform the way that we react to God's judgement. If we're willing to hear that and engage with it in our hearts, it can change how we feel about judgement.

It takes us to a place where we're almost alongside God. We suddenly realise things in a new way. We see God as a father to his people. We see the ways in which he loved and cherished and looked after them, but then we watch as how they then flung it back in his face.

As we see that and feel it, we have a sense of pain and heartache. Something within us is now shocked and angry and outraged. And suddenly what is deep within us is a sense that something ought to be done. Even as we say that we realise that that 'something' is judgement – and we find ourselves in a very different place emotionally.

If that's how God thinks about our sin, then maybe something needs to be done about me too.

What that looks like isn't really my concern in this chapter – we'll cover it later below. For now, I want us to pause and let that settle in our emotions – let that change how we feel about the very idea of judgement.

Love cares

I also want to reflect on God in all of this though. This passage in Ezekiel 23 is not just the story of two sisters who become prostitutes. It's also the story of the God who loves them, who is their Father.

There's one little phrase at the start that really strikes me – God names them and then says "*they were mine.*"¹⁹ There's a mixture of love and pain in that moment. It is the love and pain of a father who sees their child ruined.

I hope and pray that you and I never experience that pain, the pain of a mother or father over a child destroying themselves. But what would you do if you were?

We often imagine that love just lets things go, that it ignores or turns a blind eye when things go wrong. We then ask, why does God make such a

¹⁹ Ezekiel 23v4

Struggling with Judgement

song and dance about sin – why can't he just ignore it? Well the answer is...because he loves us.

To ignore sin and all the ways in which it breaks and destroys us, (and those around us) isn't love – it's indifference. Love cares. Love cares too much to just stand idly by while we are ruined.

God cares. God loves them and God loves us. That means that he cannot ignore what we do wrong, and he won't give up on us.

I remember when I was little, my parents told me that no matter what I did, nothing could ever stop them from loving me. Even if I made a mess of my life, and everything went wrong, they would still love me.

God is like that, and God hasn't given up on Israel and Judah in Ezekiel 23 - and God hasn't given up on you and me. The whole point of the passage, and actually the whole point of the whole book of Ezekiel, is to get them to come to their senses and turn back to God, so that they might be forgiven and restored.

Salvation beyond judgement

The first half of Ezekiel is full of messages of judgement, but the second half is full of messages of hope, restoration, and salvation. It's the message of a God who shows us that our sin is so serious that if he must, he will judge it.

But it is also the message of a God who loves us so much that he would do anything to rescue and save us. It's the story of a God that reaches its climax at the cross, as God does everything to save us. It's the story of a God who died so that we might be forgiven and set free.

Getting emotional – Study Guide

- how do you *feel* about judgement?
- *Read Ezekiel 23v1-22 and v48-49*
 - how do you react to that passage?
 - how do you feel about the comparison of our sin to prostitution?
 - does that change the way you feel about sin and judgement?
- have you ever thought about how God feels about our sin? What difference does that make to you?
- How does the cross impact how you feel about judgement?

Chapter 5

The Cross

Postman's Park

Just round the corner from my old church in London is a little place called 'Postman's Park.' It actually used to be one of our church burial grounds. These days it's a popular haven in the midst of the hustle and bustle of City life.

On one wall of the park is a Victorian memorial to heroic self-sacrifice. Each tile remembers an ordinary person who died while trying to save others.

One of the most poignant is one to an 11-year-old boy called Solomon Galaman. His little brother slipped over in the path of an on-coming cart while the two of them were dashing across the street. Solomon immediately turned back and pushed his brother out of the way, but he then got run over and dragged along himself. He was rushed to hospital, while a policeman took his brother home and found his mum. When she got to his bedside he whispered to her "Mother, I saved him, but I could not save myself."²⁰

Why did Jesus die?

Those words seem to carry an unconscious echo of the cross. As Jesus died, the onlookers cried "*he saved others, but he can't save himself.*"²¹ Yet Jesus could have saved himself, but he chose not to. He chose to stay there, dying on the cross for them, for me, for you. As Paul wrote in Galatians 2 – "*the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me*"²²

²⁰ For a contemporary account available online see <https://www.london-walking-tours.co.uk/postmans-park/soloman-galaman.htm>

²¹ Mark 15v31

²² Galatians 2v20

But how? How does Jesus' death show God's love for me? Little Solomon Galaman's love for his brother was obvious. The cart was bearing down, and he dashed in to rescue him, effectively dying in his place. But that story only makes sense if you know what he saved his brother from.

So often when we talk about the cross, we miss that bit out. We say that Jesus died for me, we wonder at the cross, or we talk of Jesus' love – but we don't mention why it was necessary. What Jesus has saved us from? Without that the cross doesn't really make sense. That means that to understand the cross we need to talk about judgement.

This book is all about 'struggling' with judgement, wondering how our God of love could also be a God of judgement. Actually at the cross we see both. The cross is the ultimate expression of God's love, but it is also the ultimate expression of God's judgement.

Why we need to be justified

There's a brilliant little passage in Romans 3 where Paul sketches out what is going on. He sums up his argument so far in v23 and 24:

“for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ”

This message has two parts. The first is the problem, that we've messed it up and gone wrong. As Paul puts it, *“all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”*

That immediately explains why the second part is necessary. We are in a mess and we need rescuing – or to use Paul's language, justifying. So he continues: *“all are justified [or rescued] freely by his grace.”* As he continues he explains that that happens through what Jesus did on the cross. It's a beautiful little summary of the Christian gospel. But Paul doesn't stop there. He continues, and it's what he says next that really helps me.

I think we often ask why we need to be justified. It's not that we think that we're perfect. We know that we're not (I certainly do!). It's just that we don't see why that matters. We wonder why can't God just ignore the things that we do wrong. Why does there need to be judgement? Why does Jesus have to die so I can be forgiven?

Well Paul carries on. He tells us that for a time God did ignore what people did wrong. He writes, "*in his forbearance God left the sins committed before [the cross] unpunished.*"²³ But then he tells us (actually twice) that the cross was needed "*to demonstrate God's righteousness*" and so that God can both "*be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*"²⁴

Lessons from Watergate

Well what does that all mean?

One of the most spectacular scandals in recent political history was the Watergate scandal. Watergate led to the downfall of President Richard Nixon. It all went back to a break in in June 1972 at the Democratic Party's Washington HQ, the Watergate building (hence the name). In the months that followed, the break-in was slowly but surely traced back to people connected to Richard Nixon, the Republican President.²⁵

The strange thing is that Nixon himself was almost certainly not involved in the initial break in. In fact, it seems unlikely that we was even aware of it. How then can the break in have led to his downfall and resignation?

The answer is because of the cover-up. Nixon and his associate acted to cover up what had happened, and it is that that led to his downfall.

²³ Romans 3v25

²⁴ Romans 3v25-26

²⁵ The story and details of Watergate are freely available in numerous places, such as https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watergate_scandal

When we ask why God can't just ignore or forget our sin, what we are really asking is for God to do the same thing as Richard Nixon – a cover-up.

Maybe that wouldn't matter if the things we were talking about were trivial or insignificant. But over the last few chapters we've begun to unpack just how serious the things we do wrong are. We've looked at how they leave us broken and poisoned, along with those around us. Our sin has a real and disastrous impact on everyone we come into contact with.

That means that if God ignores or covers up our wrongdoing it doesn't make him more loving, it makes him guilty. To ignore my sin is to ignore what it has done to you. It means ignoring the ways it twists and destroys the lives of those around me and say that none of that matters.

If God loves you, and God loves the other people who have been touched by my sin, how can he do that? How can God forgive me? And yet he does, and he can, because of the cross.

At the cross Jesus dies in our place. At the cross Jesus takes on himself the judgement I deserve and dies for me. That means that there's no cover-up, no Watergate, no attempt to pretend that it doesn't matter. All our sins are brought into the full glare of the light at the cross. But then they are dealt with and judged. As they are judged, they are washed away.

That is what Paul means when he says in Romans 3 that God is both "*just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*"²⁶

Victim and criminal together

The thing is that we all need both. When it comes to sin, we are both the victims and the guilty. Our lives have been ruined, twisted and warped

²⁶ Romans 3v26

by other people's sins against us, but we have also done it to others. That is because all of us "*have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*"²⁷

We need a God who is just, who will recognise and deal with what has been done against us. Yet we also need a God who forgives and saves us. In other words, we need a God who is both "*just and [who] justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*"²⁸

It is because God judges Jesus in my place at the cross that makes it such good news for me. It is through his judgement that God shows me his love – which is quite a strange thought!

You might ask though how that is possible? How can God judge Jesus in our place? How does it work?

The Bible uses a number of images and illustrations to help us understand that. I want to finish this chapter by sharing a couple with you.

Paying off a debt

The first is drawn from the world of finance. This first illustration is one that is as familiar to us today as it was in New Testament times. It is the image of debt. The Bible often compares our sins to a debt that we owe but cannot afford to repay.

One of Jesus' last words at the cross though was *tetelestai* or "it is finished!"²⁹ In the ancient world that was the word which would be written across a bill or debt when it was paid off. *Tetelestai* – paid in full! At the cross Jesus pays off our debts. He pays the price of our sin.

Punished in our place

²⁷ Romans 3v23

²⁸ Romans 3v26

²⁹ John 19v30

Struggling with Judgement

A second image we find in the Bible is drawn from the Law Courts. One of my neighbours in London was London's most famous law court – the Old Bailey. When someone is found guilty in the Old Bailey, there is a different kind of price that has to be paid. This time it is not (usually) financial, but a punishment that has to be served. At the cross, Jesus is punished in our place – leaving us to go free.

It makes me think of one of the great moments in English literature, which comes at the end of Charles' Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. One of the main characters is Charles Darnay, a former French aristocrat who's been captured by the revolutionaries, and sentenced to death. Hours before his execution, his friend Sydney Carton visits him in his cell and switches places. Carton then goes to the guillotine in Darnay's place. He takes the punishment. He dies, so that Charles Darnay can go free.

At the cross, Jesus does that for us. Jesus takes our punishment and dies, so that we can go free.

Bearing our sins

My final illustration is one that many of you may already be familiar with from Alpha. It's drawn from a passage in Isaiah 53 looking forward to the cross:

“all we all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”³⁰

The illustration is a visual one – so you'll have to use your imagination (or watch the film version of this chapter!). Imagine that my hand represents me, and the sky God. Now imagine a book resting on my hand, creating a barrier between me and what's above. That book represents everything I've ever done wrong – all my sins. Those sins are a burden and

³⁰ Isaiah 53v6

barrier that cuts me off from God above. Isaiah explains that “*all we like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.*”

Now imagine that my other hand represents Jesus. Jesus was the only person who never sinned. He never did anything wrong and so always had a perfect relationship with God. So there’s nothing on that hand, nothing separating Jesus from God. But Isaiah continues “*the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*”

All my sin, the things that cut me off from God and the judgement I deserve because of them, are now carried by Jesus at the cross. So the book on my hand – the barrier of my sin – is then transferred on to Jesus. Can you see (or imagine!) where that leaves me? Suddenly the hand the represent me is empty. I’m free! I’m forgiven and back in relationship with God.

Forgiveness not forgetfulness

That is really the key to what is going on at the cross – that is why the cross is necessary. We often think that what we need is for God to just forget the things we do wrong. Yet as we’ve seen, that would leave all the problems and pain unresolved. That would be a cover up.

What we actually need is forgiveness. Forgiveness is so much bigger than just forgetfulness. Forgetfulness ignores what has gone wrong but forgiveness deals with the problem. It recognises what has happened, and then puts it right. But forgiveness is only really possible if someone bears the cost, the pain, and the judgement. The one choosing to forgive takes them all on themselves. And that is what Jesus has done for us on the cross.

The Cross – Study Guide

- do you agree that if we want to understand the cross we need to understand judgement?
- *Read Romans 3v22-26*
 - why do we need to be ‘justified’? (v24)
 - why can’t God just continue ‘to leave sins...unpunished’? (v25)
 - does it matter that God is just? (v26)
- Do you ever think about judgement and justice from the perspective of the victims?
- Do the images of a debt being paid off and of Jesus bearing our punishment help you understand the cross better?
- In what ways is forgiveness better than forgetfulness?

Chapter 6

the End

Visiting a medieval masterpiece

When we were filming the final episode in the *Struggling with Judgement* film series, we travelled up to Coventry to visit one of the most spectacular medieval paintings in England. It's in Holy Trinity Church – and it doesn't disappoint. It's vivid and colourful and dramatic.³¹

The style of painting is known as a “Doom,” and they were all the rage in medieval times. They depicted the Last Judgement, with Jesus enthroned in glory judging the world. All of humanity passes before him either to heaven or to hell. The idea of “Dooms” was that they reminded the congregation that one day judgement would come, that there is a Heaven and a Hell. Frankly, that all seems rather strange to us today. Final judgement is the last thing we want to be reminded of on a Sunday morning!

Yet, judgement is an important theme throughout the Bible. Final judgement is unequivocally presented as a reality. The loose inspiration for many of these dooms is a parable that Jesus told in Matthew 25, where he describes how one day he will judge the world. He compares that final judgement to a shepherd separating out the sheep in his flock from the goats and he finishes: “*then they [the goats] will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.*”³²

That's an image that most of us find amazingly difficult to get our heads round – how can that be? How can it be that Jesus would send people to eternal punishment?

³¹ You can see pictures of the Doom, and read more about it on the Holy Trinity Coventry website <https://www.holytrinitycoventry.org.uk/discover/our-heritage/painting-of-the-last-judgement/>

³² Matthew 25v31-46

Understanding what the Bible actually says

In the previous films we've begun to unpack just how serious the things we do wrong are, and so why some form of judgement might be necessary. Yet still I think many of us still struggle with the idea of a final or eternal judgement. Even if we can accept the idea of some judgement, we still struggle with that.

Some of our struggles can stem from unhelpful stereotypes and caricatures. Some of the sorts of things we see in the Coventry doom definitely fall into that category. Horned devils with pitchforks, tending blazing furnaces with a sort of sadistic glee, and images like that are both unhelpful and unbiblical.

Whichever picture as a whole may be loosely based on that parable in Matthew 25, those images are not. They have more to do with a blend of pagan mythology and medieval scaremongering than anything you'd find in the Bible.

The Bible is actually fairly vague about what that eternal punishment looks like. Sometimes it speaks of darkness, sometimes it speaks of fire, and at other times it speaks of a 'second death.'³³ Some understand references to torment and fire as implying a place of eternally ongoing

³³ Examples of the first include Matthew 8v12, Matthew 22v13, Matthew 25v30, 2 Peter 2v17, Jude 1v13.

Examples of the second include Matthew 3v12, Matthew 5v22, Matthew 13v42, Matthew 18v9, Matthew 25v41, Hebrews 10v27, Revelation 20v14.

Examples of the third include John 8v51, Romans 6v23, James 5v20, Revelation 20v14. There is also considerable debate about the meaning implied by the word *Gehenna*, usually translated 'hell' in English Bibles. The word originally referred to an actual place outside Jerusalem, where child sacrifice took place in Old Testament times, until stopped by King Josiah. After the Exile it started to be used as an image and metaphor for final judgement, either because it was used for cremations and burials (which may suggest it was tied in with the idea of a second death) or because it was turned into a burning rubbish tip because of its former evil (which could be used as an image of annihilation or eternal torment). For an easy overview of the issues and references, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valley_of_Hinnom_\(Gehenna\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valley_of_Hinnom_(Gehenna))

torment, a literal ‘Hell.’ Others highlight the imagery of second death and suggest the references that those who are judged will cease to exist.³⁴

Yet, however we understand God’s judgement, one thing that is clear is that this final judgement is a terrible thing. And so, even without the unhelpful images, I think most of us probably still struggle – why can’t God just forgive everyone?

I want to suggest two answers to that question, and both may surprise you.

God loves you

The first answer to the question, ‘why does God judge?’ is ‘because God loves you!’ God doesn’t just forgive everyone, because he loves us – because people and individuals matter. Let me explain a bit more.

Thus far in this book, we’ve mainly looked at things from perspective of the sinner – I’m broken, I’m not what I should be. But what about impact that has on you? Think of how my sin breaks and destroys you, how it causes you pain and heartache and suffering. If you matter – that matters.

If that matters to God, then he can’t just ignore it, and pretend it didn’t happen. To do that would actually be to diminish you and sacrifice his love for you on the altar of my happiness and salvation. Essentially that would be to say that I matter more than you and say that you have to pay the price, bear the burden of my sins against you. And that’s not fair, just or right – and God will not do it.

Again and again in scripture the cry for justice, comes not from God, but from us. It comes from the victims. For instance, in Psalm 119:84 the

³⁴ An example of the first view would be Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle *Erasing Hell* (Cook, 2011), while an example of the second view would be John Stott pp313-320 in *Essentials* (Hodder 1988).

Struggling with Judgement

Psalmist cries out “*how long must your servant wait?*” *When will you punish my persecutors?*”

Confronting the need for judgement

I remember a friend who'd been a missionary in the Central African Republic talking about this. He told us how amongst the people of that nation, judgement was seen as good news. It told them that all the injustices and pain and brutality that they had suffered mattered to God – even though the rest of the world seemed to forget about them. The message of judgement showed them that they as people mattered to God, and he would one day put their injustices right. My friend gently asked us whether one reason why we in the west struggle with judgement, is that we no longer remember why we need it.

Yet actually even where I live in the UK, in the middle of one the safest, fairest, most settled places in the world, evil and injustice still breaks through and ruins and warps our lives. Have you Ever watched the news and cried out in anger at some terrorist attack or atrocity? Have you ever railed in hopelessness at the injustices of modern slavery or people trafficking? Have you ever seen something which made you cry out for justice? If you have, then you have caught a glimpse of why there must be judgement.

Can you imagine a moment in eternity when a victim of people trafficking and rape discovers that her tormentor walks the streets of paradise with her? Can you imagine her discovering that he was unrepentant and unmoved by her suffering, but that God didn't mind? God had let him into heaven anyway.

Can you imagine how she would feel, and how cruel and inhumane and degrading that would be for her? It would seem to make a mockery of all she had suffered, and turn that place from heaven into hell. If you can imagine that, then you know why there must be judgement.

The need for judgement in our context

For most of us, our pain and suffering and need for justice may not be as great as that. Yet still our lives are blighted by stress and pain and heartache and suffering. Still that all matters, and still because God loves me...God judges.

Why does God forgive?

Actually, when we see that, the problem is no longer why God judges, but why he forgives. I mentioned a moment ago the idea of a victim of rape and slavery discovering her tormentor walking the streets of paradise alongside her, and the injustice and the horror of that.

Shockingly though the gospel tells us that “*whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life*” – no matter who they are or what they’ve done.³⁵ Stephen the first martyr will discover Saul, his tormentor, at his side. Victims and those who brutalised them will be alongside each other in paradise – how can that be?

I imagine the victims turning to Jesus and asking: why? Why is he here? Did you not see what he did to me? Does that not matter? Do I not matter?

And I imagine Jesus turning to them with tears in his eyes and pointing them to the cross, and saying: yes – it does matter. It matters so much that I had to die. Something had to be done, because you are that important to me and I love you so much. But the only thing that could ever be enough was me...myself...I died to pay that cost.

The need for repentance

Yet that price can only be paid if we will accept it. We cannot be allowed into heaven without repentance in our hearts because otherwise the cost has

³⁵ John 3v16

been rejected. That would mean that there has been no justice, no price – and that cannot be allowed for the sake of the victims.

So for those who reject God’s forgiveness at the cross, there must still be final judgement. So, why does God judge? One answer is that he loves you.

Judgement and heaven

The second answer I want to give to the question ‘why does God judge?’ may at first seem equally surprising. God judges because of heaven. Without judgement, there can be no paradise.

One of the most famous and popular passages in the Bible comes in Revelation 21. It’s a glorious vision of a new heaven and a new earth, a paradise in which ‘*God will wipe every tear from our eyes, and where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.*’⁸⁶

What most people miss is that the bit immediately before that passage, in Revelation 20, is all about final judgement. The final verses of Revelation 20 are: “*the lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, they were thrown into the lake of fire.*”⁸⁷

The difficult truth is that actually these passages go together for a reason. You cannot have one without the other. You cannot have paradise without judgement, heaven without its opposite.

Why is that? The answer is that if I were to enter heaven now, I would destroy it. And so would you.

The need for transformation

⁸⁶ Revelation 21v4

⁸⁷ Revelation 20v14-15

Struggling with Judgement

In the previous chapters we have explored how our sin leaves us broken and poisoned. If we were just allowed into heaven as we are, we would bring the brokenness and poison in with us. We would ruin paradise.

It's a sobering thought! As I am at the moment, I would turn heaven into hell – or at least back into earth, with all its pain, problems, and suffering. And so, before I can be let into heaven, I need to be fixed.

Again, the problem is not what we thought it was. It's not 'why doesn't God let everyone into heaven?', it's 'how can God let anyone into heaven?'

Again, the answer is found at the cross. We touched on this earlier in the book. There is a future element to our salvation. While we have been saved (past tense) forgiven, set-free, and brought back into relationship with God, we have not yet experienced everything that goes with that.

There is also a future element to our salvation. Paul talks about this particularly in 1 Corinthians 15. When Jesus returns and the dead are raised, in that moment we will experience the fullness of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. We will rise again with him or change in that moment. When we do, the brokenness and the poison will be gone. We will be changed and made perfect at last.

That means that we will be ready for heaven. We will be perfect and able to enter paradise without destroying it.

The need for repentance...again

Again though, that can only happen if we will accept it and repent. We need to repent and believe, allowing God to save us. The heart of sin is our rejection of God and determination to go our own way, as we saw in chapter 3. If we refuse to repent and turn to God, that root of sin is still there, and we cannot be transformed. Once again, we see that for those who reject God's salvation at the cross, there must still be final judgement. If not, they will destroy heaven for us all.

One of my favourite authors is C. S. Lewis. Somehow he had a gift for explaining things that the rest of us struggle to get our heads round. In his book *The Great Divorce* he explains this beautifully. It's a long passage – but here are some of the key moments:

“some people say...that the final loss of one soul gives the lie to all the joy of those who are saved...but it does not...that sounds very merciful: but see what lurks behind it...the demand of the loveless and the self-imprisoned that they should be allowed to blackmail the universe: that till they consent to be happy (on their own terms) no one else shall taste joy: that theirs should be the final power; that Hell should be able to veto Heaven...it must be one way or the other...it must be one way or the other. Either the day must come when joy prevails and all the makers of misery are no longer able to infect it: or else for ever and ever the makers of misery can destroy in others the happiness they reject for themselves.”³⁸

The offer of eternal life

So, why does God judge? We have given two answers: because God loves you and; because of heaven.

Both those answers also point us to another truth – God doesn't judge us because he wants to, or because he takes pleasure in it, or because he wants us to suffer. In fact, quite the opposite. Paul wrote to Timothy “*God our saviour wants all people to be saved.*”³⁹

God wants you to know eternal life.

God wants you to experience the joys of heaven.

God wants you to be with him forever.

³⁸ The whole passage can be found in the final paragraphs of *The Great Divorce*.

³⁹ 1 Timothy 2v4

Struggling with Judgement

That is why Jesus came to earth as a man, and lived, died and rose again for us – so that we could be saved.

The End – Study Guide

- How do you feel about the idea of final judgement?
- *Read 119:84 (cf. Revelation 6v9-11)*
 - In the film David suggests that one reason why God judges is because he loves us, and what has been done to us matters. How do you react to that idea?
- *Read Revelation 19v11 to 20v8*
 - How do you react to the idea that judgement and salvation are inextricably linked?
- How does the good news of the cross impact how you feel about God's judgement?
- Looking back on the whole series, has your reaction to God's judgement changed in any ways?
 - If yes, how?
 - In what ways do you still struggle? You may want to pray about these, or to discuss them further with your pastor.

Explore More

Recommended resources and reading

For those wanting to explore this area in depth, I would highly recommend:

- Miroslav Wolf, *Exclusion and Embrace* Abingdon (1997)

For those wanting a slightly lighter read, the following are also excellent:

- Tim Keller ‘How can a loving God send people to Hell’, pp68-84 in *The Reason for God* (Hodder, 2008)
- Tim Keller *Judges for You* (Good Book Co., 2013)
- Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle *Erasing Hell* (Colorado, 2011)
- Christopher J. H. Wright *The God I don’t Understand* (Zondervan, 2009)
- John Stott, pp313-320 in *Essentials: a Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Hodder 1988)

I would also highly recommend exploring the key Bible passages mentioned in the series/book, and maybe reading further on them in a good commentary. There are too many commentaries to list here, but if you are struggling to find a good commentary, ask your pastor or please do email us on hello@burningheart.org