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ETERNAL JUDGMENT

As we approach this matter of eternal judgment, it is with a realization that much about life in the hereafter is beyond our present knowledge. This may be because we could not understand if God revealed it, or it may be that God feels we do not need more than He has given. Rather than reach into the realms of speculation, we prefer to stay on the basis of the fundamental principles of that which has been made known. Obviously, even this requires caution, for our interpretation of these principles can greatly affect our final thinking. The Restoration Movement has insisted that all Scriptures be interpreted to reveal God as He is—loving, kind, merciful, and just. As a result, many of our affirmations concerning the hereafter are distinctive.

JUDGMENT AT DEATH

The Scriptures tell us that when a man dies, his body returns to the dust from whence it came and the spirit returns to God Who gave it (see Ecclesiastes 12:7). At this time a judgment takes place, for the spirits of the righteous go to paradise (see Luke 23:44; Revelation 2:7) while the rebellious and unbelieving are assigned to hell (see Psalm 9:17, 55:15). Hell is also referred to as the pit (see Ezekiel 31:16, 32:27-29) and the prison (see Isaiah 24:22).

We affirm that this is not eternal judgment because it is apparent that both in paradise and hell, men shall be taught and given the opportunity to respond to Christ. It is certain that those who go to hell are taught, for Christ “preached unto the spirits in prison” (1 Peter 3:19). The purpose of Christ teaching the spirits in prison is so they “might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live in the spirit according to the will of God” (1 Peter 4:6).

Essentially, hell is the abode of the rebellious and unbelieving from death until the great day of judgment. It is likewise apparent that there are different levels in hell, for both Moses and David speak of the “lowest hell” (see Deuteronomy 32:22; Psalm 86:13, 88:6).

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As we have noted, the judgment of which we have been speaking so far is not eternal judgment. It is apparent that even those consigned to hell will not remain there forever, for death and hell must deliver up the dead and will then be themselves destroyed (see Revelation 20:13-14). This is but more evidence that all men must one day face eternal judgment. We cannot escape responsibility for the way we live either here or in eternity. Following that judgment, some will live gloriously in the presence of God or in lesser glories, but others will taste the second death. God will not be vindictive in eternal judgment. His mercy will be extended beyond the fondest hopes of man.

Nevertheless, the law of mercy cannot cancel the law of justice. As God is infinitely merciful, He is also infinitely just (see Alma 19:104-112). Even though He reaches with grace through the life beyond in His attempt to save man, there comes a time when man—if he has left sin unchecked in his life—is beyond salvation. Thus, there must come a time when all men will stand before God to be judged and receive the rewards of their choosing—choices made in their lives to that time.

BY WHAT SHALL MEN BE JUDGED?

Jesus is both the judge and the standard of judgment. We will be judged according to our works (see Revelation 20:12-13; Matthew 7:31, 16:30; 2 Nephi 12:66; Ecclesiastes 12:14; Galatians 6:7-8), according to the words of Christ (see John 12:46-48; 2 Nephi 11:30), and by the law (see Romans 2:12-15; 2 Nephi 6:51-56). Each of these is ultimately related to Christ. By the law is established a basic way of life; by His words and life come the ultimate standards for humanity. Our works are the measure of our response to these.

REWARDS OF GLORY

The very nature of justice tells us that not all men should receive the same reward. Inasmuch as judgment and reward depend upon our response to the standards set by the Christ, the differences in men regarding this response demand varying degrees of reward. Our Master revealed this when speaking of the “many mansions” (John 14:2). Paul also bore witness as he wrote of the glories of the sun, moon, and stars (see 1 Corinthians 15:41).

Latter-day revelation tells us that those who are fitted for life in the celestial kingdom with God are those who received the testimony of Jesus and were obedient to His commandments, whereby they received the Holy Spirit in their lives and gained power through faith to overcome. They have been willing to receive of the fullness of the gospel and have responded positively. Most important of all, “These are they who are just men made perfect through Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, who wrought out this perfect atonement through the shedding of his own blood” (D&C 76:5q).

Some by interpretation have felt this indicated that only those who accepted the fullness of the gospel during this life could ever attain such glory. Such interpretation does injustice to the nature of God—for many have died and will yet die without any earthly opportunity to receive this fullness. The fact of the infinite justice and mercy of God demands that all men have opportunity to accept this fullness of Christ, either in this life or in the life to come.

The Spirit of God revealed this to Joseph Smith, Jr.: “All who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God; also all that shall die henceforth without a knowledge of it, who would have received it with all their hearts, shall be heirs of that kingdom; for I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts” (*Church History*, volume 2, page 16).

We read that the terrestrial world differs in glory as the moon differs from the sun. In this kingdom will be some who “are the spirits of men kept in prison, whom the Son visited and preached the gospel unto them, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, who received not the testimony of Jesus in the flesh but afterwards received it” (D&C 76:6c). They are also “honorable men of the earth, who were blinded by the craftiness of men” (D&C 76:6d). These receive of the glory of God and the presence of the Son but not the fullness of the Father. They obtain not the crown over the Kingdom of God because they were not valiant in testimony. These are those who for one reason or another refused to accept the fullness of the gospel; when that opportunity came to them, they were satisfied with less. In this life they either rejected His gospel and thus had to pay the price of imprisonment to receive Him, or they were willing to accept a portion and were part of the deception which caused them to fail to seek the fullness Christ made possible (see D&C 76:6).

Concerning the telestial glory, we find a number of interesting things (D&C 76:7). As one star differs from another star in glory, it seems there are to be many degrees of reward in this classification. These are those who have spent much time in hell. They did not come forth in the first resurrection but remained among the wicked during the millennial reign, when Christ will be on earth for a thousand years. Among them are liars, sorcerers, adulterers, and whoremongers—those who have manifested all manner of evil, save one: “They deny not the Holy Spirit” (D&C 76:7c). But they have eternally refused to receive the gospel and testimony of Jesus.

These have suffered the wrath of almighty God. As a result, they receive not the ministry of the Father or the Son in the eternal world. But they do receive “the administering of angels, who are appointed to minister for them” (D&C 76:7f). In that great day of judgment, they shall see that which they had not previously seen. At that time, “These all shall bow the knee, and every tongue shall confess to him who sits upon the throne forever and ever” (D&C 76:7u). “They shall be judged according to their works; and every man shall receive according to his own works and his own dominion in the mansions which are prepared; and they shall be servants of the Most High; but where God and Christ dwell, they cannot come, worlds without end” (D&C 76:7v).

In many ways even the glory of the telestial and those permitted to enjoy it are beyond human comprehension. Only a deep conviction of the extent of God’s love and mercy can explain it. Here are men who have rejected God and Christ for countless ages of time. They will have paid the price of God’s wrath on earth and through the long imprisonment of hell. Nevertheless, having paid this

price, when they stand before the judgment bar, they receive a reward of glory according to the good they have done in their lives—little or great as it might have been. What great love our Lord extends to all men!

Only the sons of perdition, those who have rejected the power of God after receiving it in their lives—having willfully yielded themselves to the power of the devil and defied the power of God—only these taste of the awfulness of second death and are consigned to eternal torment in the lake of fire and brimstone along with the devil and his angels (see D&C 76:4; Revelation 20:15).

WHAT OF ETERNAL PROGRESSION?

There are many who fail to see the eternal nature of eternal judgment. They feel that if Christ is to be successful in His work, the time must come when all men will stand worthily before God and live gloriously in His presence. As a result, they believe in the “doctrine of eternal progression.” They believe that through the eons of eternity, men will progress toward God until all achieve life with Him. This is not so, not because God does not want it to be, but because sin destroys agency. If man has yielded himself completely and endlessly to Satan, there is no agency left by which He can choose the power to return to God. Sin left unchecked will inevitably produce death. Sin at its worst, as seen in the sons of perdition, inevitably results in the second death, a death so real that they shall not and cannot be redeemed in the due time of the Lord (see D&C 76:4e).

They have chosen the devil as their master, and with him they must live. Even those of the telestial kingdom, who receive some degree of reward, must ever remain where they are. “Where God and Christ dwell, they cannot come, worlds without end” (D&C 76:7v). From the day of their birth, the principle of judgment has worked within them; and now comes the climax of it all. This is eternal judgment. If they have not returned to God, it is not Christ who has failed. He has conquered sin and death and has victoriously offered every man the power to become the sons of God, not only in this life but in the life to come. Christ does not fail; but it is men who fail—by choice—to achieve the glory God created them to enjoy.

Alma tells the importance of using our “time of probation” wisely: “If we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness, wherein there can be no labor performed. Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis, that I will repent, that I will return to my God For that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world. For behold, if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil, and he doth seal you his” (Alma 16:23-233).

Questions for Discussion

1. Explain the statement, “Any glory less than celestial glory will be one of condemnation.”
2. Why must we be careful in the study of this principle to rely on revelation and avoid speculation?
3. What judgment awaits us immediately at death?
4. By what are all men judged?
5. What are the rewards of glories, and why do we not believe in progression in eternal life?