

Our Only Two Choices

TEXT: Isaiah 34-35

PHBF 10.09.16

Scr. Reading: Isaiah 34:1-10, 35:1-10

Behold Your God!

SOS Verse: **Isaiah 40:18-21** *To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? ¹⁹ An idol! A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains. ²⁰ He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot; he seeks out a skillful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move. ²¹ Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?*

R. C. Sproul is a theologian and teacher who has written a number of excellent books. In his modern classic *The Holiness of God*, he tells a story from his early years of teaching college: 250 freshmen in an OT course, S reviewed assignments the first day, noted the three papers each one due *the last day of the month* throughout the semester, no extensions or exceptions for any reason, ALL late papers receive an “F.” Last day of September: 225 papers on his desk, 25 students “stood, quaking in terror, full of remorse: ‘Oh Professor Sproul, we are so sorry. We didn’t budget our time properly. We didn’t make the proper adjustment from high school to college. Please don’t give us an F. Please, oh please give us an extension.’” S granted an extension, students praised, thanked, promised to be on time next month. Last day of October: 200 papers, 50 students empty-handed, nervous not panicked: “Homecoming Week, midterms, lots of other assignments due, one more chance, will never happen again.” S relented once again, reminded them of the penalty: F, no excuses, no whining, clear? Spontaneous praise, Mr. Popularity. Last day of November: 150 papers, 100 others utterly unconcerned: “Don’t worry, we’ll get them to you in a couple days.” S started to call students by name and ask if their paper was finished. Every “no” was immediately marked an “F.” Cries of “not fair, completely unreasonable” began to ring out. “I see. It’s justice you want? I seem to recall you were late with your paper before. If you insist on justice, I can certainly provide it. I’ll not only give you an F for this assignment, but I’ll change all previous late papers to F’s as well.” Students were stunned but willingly settled for only 1 F instead of 2 or 3. S concludes: “The students had quickly taken my mercy for granted. They assumed it. When justice suddenly fell, they were unprepared for it. It came as a shock, and they were outraged. This, after only two

doses of mercy in the space of two months. ...What amazes us is justice, not grace.” (124-6)

Sproul is right. ***God’s just judgment is so rarely meted out, even in the Scriptures, we’re shocked when we see it.*** In fact, most Americans are so conditioned by ideas of pluralism and tolerance, they assume all they have to do to enter heaven is die. If there is a God, the one thing we know for certain is that He will accept everyone, with the possible exception of the most evil offenders like Hitler and Jeff Dahmer and whichever presidential candidate you dislike most. To imagine for a moment that God would judge us is an affront so offensive most people reject it altogether. How much more outrageous is the idea that His judgment might mean more than just a slap on the wrist.

Bur friends, we cannot cherry pick the Bible for inspirational verses only. Actually, some Christians do, but I will not do that as a pastor and as long as I’m here we will not do that as a church. I will not come between you and the God of the Bible as He represents Himself in His word. ***We will listen as He speaks and accept Him on His own terms.*** As Doug Wilson says, the Bible is “God’s fastball, high and inside” (*Letter from a Christian Citizen*, 55). In other words, it’s a warning, and we would do well to pay attention to it and stop crowding the plate.

See, the best thing about God’s judgment is that He invites you to flee! He’s made it possible for you to escape. The Bible clearly presents TWO OPTIONS for how our life might end—JUDGMENT or SALVATION! Repent and turn to Jesus. Don’t run from the doctrine of divine judgment in indignation. Instead, run to the cross where God’s wrath was satisfied so that your soul could be satisfied forever. In Jesus. For God’s eternal glory and your eternal joy.

We need to keep the whole gospel together. If we lose the bad news, we lose the good news, too. The good news of the gospel is not: “Jesus died to save you from all your problems and to give you your best life now.” It is not even “Jesus loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” The gospel is “Jesus died to save you from the wrath of God!”

Those are your only two choices: judgment (ch 34) and salvation (ch 35).

JUDGMENT (ch 34)

v1 Draw near, O nations, to hear, and give attention, O peoples! Let the earth hear, and all that fills it; the world, and all that comes from it.

This is the climax of all human existence and history—God calls the entire world to judgment. Before the judgment, an explanation:

v2 For the LORD is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host; he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter.

The Lord is “enraged” and “furious.” Not against a few; against “all nations” and “all their host.”

And so (v2), “He has devoted them to destruction.” It’s the language elsewhere used in the OT of “consecration” (cf. ESV margin note). It is the language of the burnt offering, sacrifice, and worship. Worship displays the WORTH of God—“worth-ship.”

Point: this judgment isn’t simply a judicial act; it’s a religious act (cf. v6):

v6b For the LORD has a sacrifice in Bozrah, a great slaughter in the land of Edom.

God’s judgment isn’t just about man’s sin; it’s about God’s glory. In fact, it’s impossible to measure the depth of man’s sin except against the standard of God’s worth. Popular thinking today wants to measure morality by the worth and wellbeing of people—if it doesn’t hurt anyone, if it makes you happy, then it must be morally OK. There are multiple problems with that line of thinking, not the least of which is this: it leaves out the worth and wellbeing of the most important being in the universe—God!

Why can’t God simply forgive sin? NOTE: I want to say here that God DOES forgive sin!! But He does not “simply” forgive the way we do, as though He lets it go and forgets about it. God’s own righteousness is at stake. That’s why we need Jesus:

Romans 3:25-26 God put [Jesus] forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

God’s can’t “simply forgive” because His own holiness and character are

involved here. If sin gets pardoned, God’s name is defamed and His own character is violated. Forgiveness releases you from what you deserve. God expects human judges to uphold justice in their judgments. If God were just to deal with sin by forgiving and forgetting, He would be breaking His own commandments. **To put it most provocatively, it would be sinful for God to forgive sin.** Forgiveness is, after all, profoundly unjust. We know this, and we WANT it from our rulers.

ILLUS: In April 1992, anarchy erupted in Los Angeles in reaction to the acquittals of 4 officers from the LAPD in the videotaped beating of Rodney King, a motorist who had led officers on a high-speed chase a year earlier. For six days, the city boiled with reaction to a perceived perversion of justice. We expect our judges to render just judgments. Why would we expect any less from our God?

This is why God’s people so often praise Him for His judgment—cf. Revelation, which ends with a great chorus of praise when God defeats His enemies. Why? Because God has vindicated Himself. **His judgment upholds His own worth.** [say “verse 3” ...]

Verse 1 is a summons, verse 2 an explanation. Now without further delay, the next verses describe the judgment as it falls:

v3-4 Their slain shall be cast out, and the stench of their corpses shall rise; the mountains shall flow with their blood. ⁴ All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree.

The first thing you notice is the gore: stinking corpses, flowing blood, gorged swords, destruction... Also, the cosmic devastation: stars falling and the skies being rolled up like a scroll. What’s this all about?

Creation language is often associated in the Bible with judgment. When God judges, creation comes undone—“the heavens fall, the earth trembles, the mountains melt, etc.” Why? Because **the creation agrees with God**. Human rebellion and evil has profaned the worth and majesty of God for long enough. In the original creation, humankind was to subdue and have dominion over the earth in obedience to God. But instead of obeying God’s command, humans rebelled and overthrew God’s dominion, and so now creation responds to humanity’s dominion in exactly the same way. Instead of submitting to human beings as God intended, creation reigns and destruction ensues. It’s as if creation has

overthrown human dominion, and “uncreation” is the result. By and large, creation remains subservient to humanity, but when God finally judges His enemies, creation agrees.

In 34:11, “confusion & emptiness” mirror the terms from Genesis 1:2 that the pre-creation earth was “without form and void.” Same terms. God’s judgment has reduced the earth to its pre-ordered, pre-filled, pre-creation condition.

We see this picture fulfilled most poignantly at the death of Jesus—darkness, earthquake, rocks split. Creation was being unmade. **God’s judgment was falling on His enemy. But this time, the enemy was God’s own Son. Yahweh’s anger was directed at Jesus instead of at the wicked nations or Edom or you or me. Blood, water, death, and darkness – He’s taking God’s judgment into His own body; and all creation revolts at the horror.**

Friends, if there’s nothing else you get from Isaiah 34, get this: Jesus bore this judgment for you. If you ever are tempted to take the cross for granted, come back and reread Isaiah 34. This is what the wrath of God looks like. This is what Jesus bore on the cross for you.

Notice the agent of this judgment in verse 5:

vv5-7 *For my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens; behold, it descends for judgment upon Edom, upon the people I have devoted to destruction. ⁶ The LORD has a sword; it is sated with blood; it is gorged with fat, with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams. For the LORD has a sacrifice in Bozrah, a great slaughter in the land of Edom. ⁷ Wild oxen shall fall with them, and young steers with the mighty bulls. Their land shall drink its fill of blood, and their soil shall be gorged with fat.*

The Lord says “my sword,” v6 “The LORD has a sword... sated with blood,” v6b “the LORD has a sacrifice in Bozrah.” Often God uses intermediate agents to bring His judgment—the Assyrians wiped out Israel in 722 BC, the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 586 BC, the Romans destroyed it again 650 years later. But there are no intermediate agents here. This is the Lord Himself going to war, wielding His sword, annihilating His enemies. This judgment was coming directly from the hand of God Himself. The final step of judgment for everyone is to come face to face with God, to deal with God directly, one-on-one. And He has marked His calendar:

v8 *For the LORD has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion.*

God has scheduled a day to vindicate His own holiness and worth. He will not leave things hanging forever. All moral guilt of human beings *will be paid for*. Someone will be sacrificed for your sins—either you yourself or Christ as your substitute.

Some have suggested that there actually aren’t two options—there’s really only one. Though God must punish some people, eventually His love wins out and every single person will eventually be reconciled to God. It’s called “universalism,” and it’s an attractive idea emotionally. But the Scriptures get in the way:

vv9-17 *And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch. ¹⁰ Night and day it shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it forever and ever. ¹¹ But the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it, the owl and the raven shall dwell in it. He shall stretch the line of confusion over it, and the plumb line of emptiness. ¹² Its nobles- there is no one there to call it a kingdom, and all its princes shall be nothing. ¹³ Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses. It shall be the haunt of jackals, an abode for ostriches. ¹⁴ And wild animals shall meet with hyenas; the wild goat shall cry to his fellow; indeed, there the night bird settles and finds for herself a resting place. ¹⁵ There the owl nests and lays and hatches and gathers her young in her shadow; indeed, there the hawks are gathered, each one with her mate.*

This judgment doesn’t end with the day of vengeance. Edom continues as a perpetual ruin, and the prophet seems to go out of his way to show that the city remains under this judgment for perpetuity (v10 “night and day,” “forever,” “from generation to generation,” “forever and ever.”) This sinful city is not eventually purged of its sins after a long period of suffering (as Catholicism teaches) and finally brought into paradise with God. **The devastation here is permanent.** The doctrine of Universalism fails. **This place remains under judgment forever.**

But notice in passing that it’s not only the judgment that remains forever, but the place itself remains forever as well. Even though the Lord devoted Edom to destruction (vv2,5), recognizable features of the kingdom remain forever. Certainly no “nobles” or “princes” (v12)—i.e., no civilization here ever again. This ruin is such a shell of its former self,

it's almost a misuse of the term to "call it a kingdom" anymore (v12). Yet this ruin of a kingdom hasn't been utterly obliterated and reduced to dust either—"strongholds" and "fortresses" remain (v14). **It continues as a devastated ruin forever**, reduced from a civilized, orderly kingdom to a ghostly haunt for the creatures of the wilderness: the hawk, porcupine, owl, raven (v11), jackals, ostriches (v13), wild animals, hyenas, wild goats, night bird (v14). "

vv16-17 *Seek and read from the book of the LORD: Not one of these shall be missing; none shall be without her mate. For the mouth of the LORD has commanded, and his Spirit has gathered them. ¹⁷ He has cast the lot for them; his hand has portioned it out to them with the line; they shall possess it forever; from generation to generation they shall dwell in it.*

The land is left a perpetual waste – deliberately designed this way by God Himself: "stretch the line... the plumb line..." No reprieve. No restoration. A perpetual smoldering ruin. Utter finality—"smoke shall go up forever."

APP: This is the vision that has motivated the great missionary movements of the centuries—God's judgment is coming, and the only hope of the nations is to hear the gospel! The vision of Isaiah is a missionary vision. The heart of God is not finally fixed on judgment. This is not what He delights in. This is not the main goal He is working towards in human history. He wants to save! But we must start here!

Christian friend, please don't think it is unkind or impolite for us to talk about God's judgment! Jesus said more about judgment than anyone else in the Bible by far. And Jesus didn't just mention the word "hell" and move on. He described it. He portrayed it in terms as graphic as those anywhere else in the Bible: a place of fiery torment, outer darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth, like being cut in pieces, where worms don't die and fires aren't quenched. Why don't we talk about things like this? Are we too kind, too wise, too gracious? Think again about who it was who said all these awful things. This is Jesus, the most kind, wise, and gracious man who ever lived! Am I really prepared to say that I don't talk about God's judgment because I'm more kind, wise, and gracious than Jesus Himself? Is it really a net gain for anyone if Christians ignore hell, don't think about it, and never mention it? Ask yourself this: ***If my witness costs me my reputation, my friends, my job, my house, even my life... but it rescues one soul from hell, isn't that***

worth it? More than worth it – isn't that a bargain? ***We who know Christ have nothing to lose, while the soul rescued from death has everything to gain!*** Francis Schaeffer used to say that if he had one hour to share the gospel with someone, he would spend the first 50 minutes talking about God's judgment and the final 10 minutes on God's grace and salvation—without the bad news of judgment, the good news loses all of its appeal.

ILLUS: bridge, river, love, threat

SALVATION (ch 35)

If judgment is uncreation, salvation is recreation:

vv1-2 *The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; ² it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.*

Salvation is a new beginning, a fresh start. Paul makes this point explicitly: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation..." (2 Cor 5:17). The coming of Christ re-creates humanity, re-boots culture, re-starts the cosmos.

Notice all the joy in this chapter?

- v1 – glad, rejoice
- v2 – rejoice with joy and singing
- v6 – sing for joy
- v10 – singing, everlasting joy, gladness and joy

Why? "They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God." What makes heaven paradise is that God lives there and we get to see Him and be with Him forever! ***What it means to be saved is not that we stop being bad; it's that we see God's glory!*** Where? When? How? The gospel – 2 Cor 4:6 – we see God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ. ***Every sermon we want to display the glory of Christ to satisfy your soul!***

vv3-7 *Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴ Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you." ⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶ then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; ⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool, and the*

thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

Who inhabits this new land?

vv8-9 *And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. ⁹ No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.*

The name of the main highway answers the question: “the Way of Holiness.” Holy people. Not “the unclean.” “Those who walk on the way”—i.e., the “way of holiness.” Somehow, even fools are kept in line in this place. Nothing violent like a lion. No one threatening like a ravenous beast.

If you think about it, these are steep qualifications. If the “way of holiness” is anything like the God of holiness we saw in Isaiah 6, none of us qualifies to walk on this heavenly highway. But wait... look more closely at HOW these pedestrians became so holy—they are called “the redeemed” (v9) and “the ransomed” (v10). These people didn’t make themselves holy. They aren’t here by virtue of their own virtue. Redemption via payment of a ransom brought them here. Redemption isn’t necessary for the natural-born sons. Redemption is only necessary for slaves. In the ancient world, when a king would defeat an enemy, the conquered people would often become his slaves. ***What kind of King conquers His enemies and then makes them His friends? The same King who redeems slaves at the ransom price of His own Son.***

If we let Isaiah 34’s description of God’s attitude toward the world settle in to our minds, how surprised we would then be to read in John: “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son.” Really? The world is God’s enemy. The world is in rebellion against God. But God sent his Son to die for His enemies. He did not die for friendly, good-hearted religious people who just needed a little boost to be good enough for heaven. He died for enemies, under wrath, condemned to die (Rom 5:8). In fact, on the cross Jesus stood in our place as God’s enemy. He took into His own body all the rage, fury, destruction, and slaughter of God the Father. This was His concern in the Garden—drinking “the cup” of God’s wrath.

The gospel means that the worst thing that could ever happen to us has already happened to us in Jesus Christ. We have been crucified under the wrath of God for our sins, faced the penalty due us for those sins. But the best thing that could possibly happen to us has already happened in Christ as well. We have been raised from the dead in victory over death and sin, we are positioned in Christ, we have an inheritance in Christ, destined to be happy forever and ever!

v10 *And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

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