

THE LAST JUDGMENT

(Some notes on the last of three addresses given by the Rev. J. R. W. Stott at the T.S.F. Conference, 1957-8.)

i. *The Executive of the judgment*

God is 'the Judge of all the earth' but He has committed judgment to the Son (Jn. v. 22, 27). This explicit teaching in John's Gospel is not unique but is reinforced by passages in the Synoptic Gospels where Jesus states that He will be the Judge (e.g. Mt. vii. 23, xxv. 31, 32), and in the apostolic writing and preaching as in Acts x. 42 (Peter to Cornelius), Acts xvii. 30, 31 (Paul to the Athenians), and Rom. ii. 16; 2 Cor. v. 10; and 1 Tim. iv. 1. That Christ is the Judge is a cause of alarm and fear to unbelievers because it is the very One whom they have rejected before whom they must stand and give account of themselves. At the same time it is a cause of confidence to believers because their Judge is none other than their Saviour who both sympathizes with their infirmities and bore their sins.

ii. *The time of the judgment*

(a) Our destiny is settled in this life (Jn. iii. 17, 18, v. 21-24). There is a

process already operating in this life — a dual work of quickening and judging (Jn. v. 17, 21-24).

(b) Our destiny is sealed at death (Heb. ix. 27). Here we must distinguish between the intermediate state and the final state. In the intermediate state we shall be disembodied but conscious. 'Sleep', as that term is applied both by our Lord and by Paul, is a sleep of the body. We shall still await the final judgment but we shall already be either with or without Christ, and therefore in bliss or pain. This is shown by Dives and Lazarus. Dives was in Hades and yet had consciousness, memory and feeling. Lazarus was in bliss. See also Luke xxiii. 43. (The word for Paradise means a park or garden, e.g. Ne. ii. 8; Ec. ii. 5; Ct. iv. 13 in LXX of Garden of Eden; in New Testament here only.) If it did not include conscious enjoyment how could Paul prefer it to life on earth in Phil. i. 21-23 and 2 Cor. v. 8? There is no mention in Scripture of purgatorial discipline or of a place for later repentance. This also seems to be a proper conclusion from 1 Pet. iii. 19, 20 where the 'spirits in prison' are addressed by Christ 'in the spirit'. It seems to have been a visit to those in the intermediate state while He was in it Himself. The contemporaries of Noah will then be representatives of a bigger class (cf. also 1 Pet. iv. 6). A cautious exegesis does not seem to warrant a conclusion beyond that Christ on this unique occasion visited Hades to announce the good news of salvation to those who lived before it had been accomplished.

(c) Our destiny will be declared on the day of judgment. This will be a public occasion whose purpose will be not to settle our destinies, but to state them. It will be a public vindication and solemn confirmation of the sentence of God. Some biblical passages speak of a separation at this judgment, but this seems only to mean that the secret sifting now in progress in this life, settled and sealed by death, will then be finally and openly confirmed. (Jn. v. 28, 29; Mt. v. 29, 30, x. 28; Acts xxiv. 15.)

iii. *The criteria of the judgment*

The Bible lays great emphasis on the fact that all the evidence will be available (Lk. xii. 1-3; 1 Cor. iv. 5; Rom. ii. 16). There will be no possibility of a miscarriage of justice through ignorance of the facts. Everyone will be judged then without exception.

(a) According to his opportunity. The criteria of judgment will not be the same for everybody. See Jn. iii. 17-21, xii. 47, 48. In Rom. i. 19, 20, ii. 12-15 Paul speaks of what the Gentiles know of God's power and deity on the one hand and His moral law on the other. Everyone has received God's general revelation both externally in creation and internally in conscience. The question will be how have we responded to the light we have received, the word we have heard and the knowledge of God's power and righteous demands that we had through creation and conscience? 'To whom much is given, of him much shall be required' (Lk. xii. 48). See also Mt. vii. 1-2; Rom. ii. 1-3; Jas. iii. 1; Amos iii. 2. The greater the opportunity, the greater the responsibility.

(b) According to his character. We shall be judged according to what we are, as evidenced by what we have said and done. It is important to remember the public character of the day of judgment. Part of its purpose (if not its main purpose) is to vindicate the ways of God in judgment, so that all will acquiesce in the judgment of God and will say 'Hallelujah; Salvation, and glory . . . and power, unto our God: for true and righteous are his judgments . . . Amen. Hallelujah' (Rev. xix. 1-4). Therefore public evidence will be produced, — especially a man's works and words. For *works* see Mt. xvi. 27; Jn. v. 29; 2 Cor. v. 10; Rom. ii. 6, 9, 10; Rev. xx. 12 (cf. 15). Perseverance in good works will be looked for, especially works of love. (Jas. i. 27, ii. 14-18.) 'My brethren' (in Mt. xxv. 35 *et seq.*) may refer to humans in general (cf. Heb. ii. 11, 17) or to Christians in particular (cf. Mk. iii. 31; Mt. xxviii. 10). Our attitude shown to other Christians comes first, however, for our secret attitude to Christ is revealed by our open attitude to Christians (even the *least* of 'these my brethren'). Compare Saul of Tarsus in Acts ix. 1, 4, 'Why persecutest thou me?'

Our *words* are also to be remembered in the judgment. We shall give account of every idle word (Mt. xii. 36, 37 and this because of verse 34). One example of this is confessing Christ with our lips (Mt. x. 32, 33) and willing-ness to suffer for such a confession (2 Tim. ii. 12).

Therefore although we are justified by faith we shall be judged by works, for works are the public evidence of faith and they are sufficient and reliable evidence. This is perfectly plain in Scripture. The criterion will be: our words and works; what we have done and said; whether we have ministered to the needy and forgiven our enemies; whether we have confessed Christ and suffered for Him. Such things as these constitute the only possible public evidence of the reality of our secret faith.

iv. *The issues of the judgment*

Scripture offers us a solemn either/or. It will be like the threshing of corn (Mt. iii. 12) or the reaping of harvest (Mt. xiii. 26-30), or the sorting of the catch (Mt. xiii. 47-50) — a separation of good from evil. Mt. xxv. 31-46 is not a parable. 'He shall separate them one from another'. They will be placed on the left or the right, and pronounced blessed or cursed. They will be invited to come and inherit the kingdom prepared for them or commanded to go to the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels. There may be grades within these two divisions (e.g. Lk. xii. 47, 48; Mt. x. 15, xi. 22-24 and parables of talents and pounds), but there are only two alternatives and we must resist the attractions of the alternative views that there are either three ultimate destinies or only one. Universalist teaching is based more on philosophical presupposition than on biblical warrant, although some biblical evidence is adduced for it. The main points are:— The inexhaustible patience of God's love as shown by such themes as the shepherd seeking the sheep and the woman the coin 'until he/she find it'; this however ignores God's wrath. The universal embrace of God's love as shown by phrases like 'all things', 'all men'. But the word 'all' cannot always be stressed in Scripture, as in many contexts it clearly means all classes or sections of men (e.g. Acts xix. 10, ii. 17; cf. Jn. xii. 32). Or it expresses God's desire that all men *should* be saved, rather than His purpose that all men *shall* be (1 Tim. ii. 4; Tit. ii. 11; Phil. ii. 9-11). There remain the passages 1 Cor. xv. 24; Eph. i. 10; Col. i. 20; but since other Scriptures clearly exclude Satan the apparent universalism of these passages is not to be taken literally.

The great objection to universalism is that the separation described in Scripture is said to be not only absolute, but irrevocable and irreversible. A great gulf is 'fixed', the door is 'shut'. The wrath is 'poured out'. What a man sows he will reap. The fire is 'eternal' and 'unquenchable' and the worm 'dieth not'. Heaven and Hell are absolutely contrasted, and Hell is described as 'the second death', 'outer darkness', 'the lake of fire'.

There remains the question as to whether Hell is an eternal and conscious torment. Annihilation or extinction of being has an obvious attraction. (a) It would explain those verses which drive some people to universalism; for instance it makes it clearer how 'all things' could be summed up in Christ and God be 'all in all'. (b) It answers the philosophical question as to whether evil can be as eternal as good and meets the feeling that neither God's victory nor our bliss would be complete if millions were still alive and (though subjugated) not restored to God. (c) Certain biblical parables are parables of destruction (e.g. the chaff is blown away by the wind and tares are burned up in the furnace), and some of the words used of Hell seem to imply cessation of being (e.g. 'perish', 'destruction', 'loss'). On the other hand, there are a few passages which it is difficult to reconcile with this interpretation, notably Rev. xx. 10, unless this refers to the devil and his angels only.

Of Heaven we may say with greater confidence that the figures used to describe it are figures of Communion — a city, a supper, a garden. Here we shall see Him face to face. We shall reflect His glory and be like Him. We shall see, share, reflect and worship His glory. (Mt. v. 8; 1 Cor. xiii. 12; 1 Jn. iii. 2; Jn. xvii. 24; Rev. xxii. 14; 2 Thes. i. 10.) We shall be given certain responsibilities too (Mt. xxv. 21, 28; 1 Cor. vi. 2; Rev. xx. 4, xxii. 5; Lk. xxii. 30). This we shall do in a new Universe — a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness (Mt. xix. 28; Acts iii. 19-21; 2 Pet. iii. 10, 13; Rev. xxi. 1, 5).