

THE GREATEST COURT CASE IN HISTORY: GOD ON TRIAL

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When a prominent leader we trust is arraigned in court, the case attracts front-page or prime-time TV coverage. Can you think of a case that would attract more attention than O. J. Simpson's trial? What kind of publicity would there be if God Himself were on trial?

Prophecy calls for a message to rivet the attention of the billions who "dwell on the earth." The phrase implies that while mundane matters absorb people's attention, an announcement will startle them and command their attention: "Fear God, and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment is come" (Rev. 14:6).

Whose Judgment? Ours, or His?

We have long thought it was only ours, and have seen the message as bad news, a stern warning of being taken to court unless we shape up. We tremble with terror at the idea.

But the original language of the first angel's message allows a different understanding. The "hour of His judgment" can also mean the hour when God Himself is to be judged. Rather than being the Accuser, He has become the Accused in the dock. And He needs a defense.

Several statements that Jesus made shed light on this. He insists that His Father will not serve as judge in the final court case: "The Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son,

because He is the Son of man" (John 5:22, 27). Further, Christ refuses to serve as judge to anyone who rejects Him: "If anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world" (John 12:47). The only people Christ will judge are those who believe in Him, and the only judgment He will render is their acquittal.

Many people have the idea that God is a vengeful Deity just waiting for a chance to strike them with His lightning bolts of retribution for their sins. And if God is indeed like this, a judgment with Him on the bench would certainly be a fearful prospect. The Bible, however, describes a God and a judgment that differs startlingly from this common misconception.

1. God is not looking for an excuse to punish us. We sometimes picture a loving Jesus who stands between us and a harsh Father. But according to the Bible, the Father loves us and is just as anxious for our eternal salvation as is the Son. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son." John 3:16. "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them." 2 Corinthians 5:19.

2. God never planned for any of us to face the terror of being found guilty in the judgment. Jesus declared that the condemnation of the judgment—"eternal fire"—was specifically "prepared for the devil and his angels." Matthew 25:41. If any human being finds himself sharing Satan's fate, it will not be because God has willed it. Those who are destroyed along with the devil and his angels will

have spurned and beaten back repeated efforts by God to save them.

3. In what appears to be a happy exception to Paul's statement about "all" appearing in judgment (2 Corinthians 5:10), Jesus declares good news: "In very truth, anyone who gives heed to what I say and puts his trust in him who sent me has hold of eternal life, and does not come up for judgment, but has already passed from death to life." John 5:24, NEB. The word *judgment* here means the condemnation of the judgment; the point is that God wants to exempt us from the terrible experience of facing judgment and being condemned.

4. The Father has turned over to Christ the task of judging men. "The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son." "And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man." John 5:22, 27.

Our judge, then, is Jesus Himself. No one more friendly to us could be found! If in a human court, the judge and all the jury members are warm personal friends, you could hardly wish for a more favorable chance of acquittal. Yet the Son of man will do for us what no earthly friend can do when we are in trouble. John says, "I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world!" 1 John 2:1, 2.

5. How can Jesus be our Advocate in a law case if He is also our Judge? God puts all the odds in our favor. Jesus is both Judge and defense Attorney.

He can defend us because He has already suffered the condemnation we deserve in the judgment. The death that Jesus died on the cross was the condemnation sin requires carried to its ultimate degree. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us." 2 Corinthians 5:21. Jesus died as the eternally lost sinner will die—"forsaken" by His Father—because "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." 1 Peter 2:24. Since He is the second Adam, we are "in Him" corporately if we choose to believe it. The idea is that when Jesus died, we also died. "I have been crucified with Christ," said Paul. Galatians 2:20. Any lightning bolts of hot wrath that should fall on sinners already fell on Christ at the cross.

By accepting Jesus as our Saviour by faith, we are identified with Him. There is not the slightest reason why anyone should have to duplicate Jesus' experience of dying for sin unless that person rejects his identity with Christ. What Jesus did on the cross is far more than a legal maneuver to satisfy the statutory claims of the broken law. It does that, of course, but it involves more—our personal identification with Him and His death. By faith the believing sinner accepts that he is "in Christ," accepts the divine judgment on his sins, but actually suffers it "in Christ." Justice makes no further claims against him. This is why he "does not come up for judgment." And everyone can have this advantage if they will accept it!

The idea of God being on trial is not as wild as it may appear. It's no secret that the vast majority of those who "dwell on the earth" are angry with Him. It's natural, because they have a carnal mind which "is enmity against God" (Rom. 8:7). They blame Him for their troubles, and especially for the horrendous injustices that plague the world at large. Our very legal terminology describes killer earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, tidal waves, and other natural disasters as "acts of God." If God is so "almighty," why doesn't He prevent 7.1 Richter-scale earthquakes? The *Sacramento Bee* reported one irate resident after the 1989 San Francisco earthquake asking, "How could God let this terrible earthquake happen?"

Alienated People Are a Problem to God.

He could act as boss and zap them out of existence, but He is fair and even generous to subject Himself to their accusations and to stand trial on their charges. Any other solution to the problem would be unwise, for it would foment further rebellion.

It has often been said that God won His case in court when Christ died on His cross 2000 years ago. In a sense He did. But humanity has kept on suffering and sinning ever since. If God completely won the war at the cross, why does the agony go on and on?

For example, our Adventist pioneers could never have dreamed of the horrors of two world wars, our present-day drug terrorism, pornography, greed, poverty, and crime.

If Christ would only come the second time, He could end all this misery. Even the saints, who aren't supposed to be angry with Him, can raise serious questions in court: Why does the Lord wait so long to come? Doesn't He feel for the world's woes? Why doesn't He do something?

The only way that God can defend Himself against a charge of indifference is to plead some circumstance beyond His control which has delayed His intervention. Such a circumstance exists; the problem is for Him to prove it in court. The cosmic prosecution and jury, the world's inhabitants and the unfallen beings of the universe, yes, even the devil and his cohorts, must see the evidence and be convinced.

The idea of God being on trial is something that only the Bible could come up with.

The Islamic Koran has no such idea; the Muslim's Allah requires the worshiper to prostrate himself in a mindless, blind submission to His capricious will, which rides roughshod over humanity's feelings. Could some Adventists think of God that way? If so, they could be closer to Islam than to biblical revelation. The God of the Bible says, "Come now, and let us reason together" (Isa. 1:18). In other words, He welcomes His own trial and is ready to take on questions and charges. The last thing He wants is mindless devotion.

Paul saw that God will have to go in the dock, and was confident "that You may be justified in Your words, and may overcome when You are judged" (Rom. 3:4). The NEB says, "And win the verdict

when Thou art on trial.” Goodspeed says, “And win your case.”

Job makes bold charges against God: “He crushes me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause. Who will appoint my day in court? He destroys the blameless and the wicked. If it is not He, who else could it be? For He is not a man, as I am, that I may answer Him, and that we should go to court together” (Job 9:17, 19, 22, 24, 32 NKJV). Deep in their hearts, many sincere people echo Job’s complaint and would join him in a class action suit against the Almighty.

Now at the very end of time comes the first angel’s startling announcement that Job and billions of others will get their chance to confront God in court and cross-examine Him. He must meet the accumulated charges of the ages. If His case can’t secure the attention of earth’s billions who now “dwell” on earthly matters, what could?

If all that’s important is their own case, people might go blithely on, unconcerned about their appearance in court, nonchalant, indifferent to their own personal fate. But they will sit up and take notice when God goes on trial. They will realize that they are character witnesses in His trial, the greatest court case of all history. Thus an entirely new motivation will transcend the hitherto supreme concern they have felt for their own personal security (the root cause of lukewarmness). They actually find it possible to be concerned for Him. That would be a miracle!

This tectonic change in human attitudes may seem impossible now.

The next millennium is being ushered in as the Age of Me-first Selfishness among rich and poor, high and low. But there can come a change! The world still marvels at how quickly Eastern Europe changed. Wrong ideas can become as obsolete as Communist rule in Eastern Europe. What can make the difference is comprehending the reality of God being on trial. Concern for Him unseals springs of human devotion and service as yet unrealized.

The Good News in the first angel’s “everlasting gospel” is, therefore, much better news than we have thought. It gives every believer in Christ something all-absorbing to live for—he/she can make a significant contribution to God’s acquittal. We need not enter the judgment shrinking in terror because of our own insecurity, but go in joyfully honoring Him. To “fear” Him is not to cower in dread of a confrontation with Him, but to thrill with tingled delight that our individual testimony for Him will be effective evidence in court. Only this can “give glory to Him.”

Why Is God on Trial?

God must somehow render the universe antiseptic to sin: Serious charges against Him must be disposed of before the second coming of Christ can take place. Unless these charges have been adequately answered to the full satisfaction of all in the universe, sin could break out again.

When “war broke out in heaven” and Satan and his angels were cast out, the loyal ones did not fully understand the issues until they saw Satan’s murderous crucifixion of the Son of God. It was then that Satan was “cast out” of heaven (Rev. 12:9),

uprooted from their last lingering sympathy for him. Christ's apparent defeat became His hour of glorious victory.

It should have then ended the case once and for all with a cosmic verdict in God's favor. In principle, Satan lost his case at the cross, and there was cause for rejoicing. But Revelation says that there is more to the case than has yet been settled: "Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time" (verse 12).

"A short time" for what? To press his case in the final court session. Satan entertains a last-ditch hope that he might yet succeed, and millions of people mournfully expect that he will. Even though Christ overcame him at the cross, there remains another battle in which God's people now must take center stage: "Our brethren ... overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (verses 10 and 11). They are now the decisive witnesses in court.

How Can God Be Vindicated?

The sacrifice of Christ on the cross was complete in that it guaranteed a final victory. But that victory has yet to be realized and demonstrated in His people. What is the problem?

Satan and millions of people press the point that God's professed people are little better than those who make no profession of devotion to the "third angel's message." He can say that they are still lukewarm (that's true; their lukewarmness is sin); they are often worldly and self-caring; their divorce

rate is almost as high as that of the world; and they do not demonstrate any significantly higher motivation of love than do the religious adherents of "Babylon." Satan thinks he has a case.

Every one of us is in a special sense an exhibit in God's great trial, giving either glory or shame to Him. Not one of us can evade the merciless spotlight of the cosmic TV lens. When Joseph was faced by a sudden, alluring temptation to sexual indulgence under circumstances as humanly private as anyone could wish, he remembered his Court responsibility: "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9). If he had "fulfilled" the desires of the flesh instead of denying them, he would have brought shame on God and cast a terrible vote for His defeat. You and I are in Joseph's role today.

The serious problem that God faces is that Laodicea's continued lukewarmness 2000 years after the cross tells the world and the universe that something doesn't work. Legally or theoretically, His plan of salvation is OK; but practically, it fails. Sin itself is not being vanquished.

Suppose we kid ourselves into thinking that everything is fine.

Then the alternative charge comes into focus: Why is Christ so slow in coming the second time? If God's people are as ready as they will ever be, why doesn't He come? They continue to sin and Christ as High Priest continues to "cover" for them. Satan charges that this has become unfair, and hundreds of millions of Muslims protest that the Christian doctrine of substitution is unethical and even

immoral. But Revelation 3:17 says that Laodicea seems satisfied with this and apparently “has need of nothing” while God in the dock must blush with shame. Meanwhile, the world's misery keeps getting worse.

In fact, Jesus says that the situation with the seventh and last church is so serious that it makes Him so sick at His stomach that He feels like throwing up (that's what verse 16 says in the Greek). If we could see His face as it really is, we would not see the frozen smile of mindless approbation that artists paint; we would see a divine face that registers the acute pain of nausea. How can we bring healing to Him?

The answer is not a more rigid works program. Neither is it a fear-oriented spiritual terrorism—straighten up or else face the plagues. We've heard that for decades, too. Neither will it help any longer to anaesthetize our spiritual nerve, blocking out the Holy Spirit's painful conviction that something is terribly wrong. Jeremiah reproves the false shepherds who tell the people that “all's well, all's well, when all is not well” (Jer. 6:14, Moffatt).

The Bible says that the answer is a special message of much more abounding grace, a message that has the power built into it that delivers from the addiction of continued sin, self-centeredness, and worldliness. Rightly understood, “the gospel of Christ is the power of God to salvation” here and now, salvation from sin (Rom. 1:16). And the message of the three angels about “the hour of God's judgment” has that power inherent within it, for it is to produce a people who

truly (not supposedly) “keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.” They “are without fault before the throne of God” (Rev. 14:12, 5).

By supplying a wholly Christ-centered motivation, the third angel's message in verity accomplishes what has never been accomplished by any generation of saints in history. “All these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us” (Heb. 11:39, 40). A far clearer understanding of the message must come when “another angel,” a fourth, comes “down from heaven having great authority” so that the earth can be “illuminated with his glory” (Rev. 18:1).

Only then can “another voice from heaven” speak with heart-convincing authority to the millions of honest souls in “Babylon,” “Come out of her, My people” (verse 4). They will respond, in numbers far beyond our present comprehension. Once the great court case is settled and God has clearly won His case, the gospel commission will be quickly finished.