
Be Still.

THOUGHTS AND READINGS FOR MEDITATION 55

Where Judgment Must Begin

by Richard Owen Roberts



*“If we think to put a cheat upon God,
we shall put a fatal cheat upon
our own souls.”*

MATTHEW HENRY

**“And Ananias hearing these words,
fell down, and gave up the ghost.” Acts 5:5**

“God is not mocked” Galatians 6:7

We live in a unique time, a confusing time. We live in a time when it is almost impossible to tell the true Church from the professing church. There has never been a time in the past when there were literally millions of people who could tell you the day and the hour they accepted Christ, but who live for self and Satan.

There are multitudes of people who honestly believe they are Christians because they’ve been baptized—many of them because of infant baptism, some because of adult baptism. They are depending on baptismal regeneration. Then there is the incredible array of people who are clinging to some decision they have made, and who have been falsely informed by their own leaders that they are indeed children of God. They are hanging their eternal welfare on decisional regeneration.

The Bible portrays regeneration by the Holy Spirit (John 3:5-8). Those people who truly are children of God have been born of the Spirit, and there is a world of difference between the Spirit’s regeneration and baptismal or decisional regeneration. Every time we add another person who knows nothing of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit to the ranks of church members and professed Christians, we add to the confusion, and further decline morally and spiritually in the land and in the world.

Let me put this question to you: does Jesus Christ save from hell? Did He come to save from hell? Many of you will remember that when the angel spoke to Joseph, he said to him, “Thou shalt call His Name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sin” (Matt. 1:21). Some of you may be guilty of having encouraged many to believe that it is possible to be saved from hell without ever having been saved from sin. I am regularly encountering substantial numbers of people who, if they speak honestly from their own heart, make it crystal clear, “I don’t even want to be saved from sin. I intend to live in sin, but I’m glad I’ve been saved from hell.”

Have you ever considered what a treacherous act against Almighty God it is to pretend that He is so utterly absurd that He saves people from hell but not from sin? Why does hell exist? Without any question, hell exists because there are those who will not repent and believe. To turn around then and suggest that out of a great heart of love and compassion, God saves people from the penalty but leaves them with the problem is an insult against our God.

Jesus Christ came to save people from their sin. I believe many of us need to learn to make a very careful distinction in our own

thinking and surely in our presentation of truth to others, between sin as a one-way ticket to hell and sin as a thief of God's glory. There is a common statement that is made within the church that repentance is a change of mind. That statement never seemed quite sufficient to me. I have come to realise something very consequential in that regard. True repentance means an exchanged mind. The unrepentant have the mind-set of the world. But the repentant have the mind-set of the Spirit. When we come to Jesus Christ, having been born of the Spirit of God, in repentance, we receive a new mind. We're not interested any longer in seeing what things we can get away with. We don't want to walk as close to the precipice as possible and just hope we won't fall over the cliff. We have the mind-set of the Spirit.

We need to learn to distinguish in our thinking and in our living, and surely in our presentation of the gospel to others, between sin as a one-way ticket to hell and sin as the thief of God's glory. God did not create man to save man from hell. God created man to glorify Him and then to enjoy Him forever. You can't break the two apart. **The notion that you can enjoy God forever and refuse or fail to bring Him glory in this life, is indeed absurd.**

With those thoughts in mind, let us turn to First Peter, chapter 4. First we will deal with the greater context found in this passage, verses 1 to 11, and then deal with the context, verses 12 through 16 and 19, and then come to the text, verses 17 and 18. In verse 1 and verse 2 we have the matter of suffering set in front of us as a declaration of its purpose: "Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God."

Why does God allow His own children to suffer? We are informed in verse 1 that Christ Himself suffered in the flesh. It is perfectly reasonable and understandable that we should suffer as well. I take it as a given that if my Saviour suffered, it is my task to arm myself with the same purpose, to realise that God is at work and has a purpose for His people. We are informed in this passage that He who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin. You may not fully understand that statement or other statements in this passage, but isn't it perfectly clear that there is a purpose in suffering and that at least part of that purpose is to bring us to that place where sin is not a ruling factor in our lives, where a great focus change has occurred so that we're not concerned about hell? We're not worried about going there. If we could go to hell for the glory of God, we would be

happy in doing so. The thing that matters to us is the glory of God. If suffering somehow brings the glory of God, then I'm all for it.

Look now at verse 3: "For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousals, drinking parties and abominable idolatries." **You have already wasted a sufficient portion of your life. Time is too short to waste any more.** You don't have another second to waste in that direction. Whatever days you have left, many or few, must be devoted to the high calling of God that you have in Christ Jesus. You can't allow some grievous disappointment to push you again into a cycle of moral and spiritual decline. Whatever time you have left must be redeemed for the glory of God. That's why you were created. You've lost countless opportunities already to bring Him glory. Don't lose another opportunity. Look at verses 4 and 5: "And in all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excess of dissipation, and they malign you; but they shall give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead." Is anybody surprised when you won't run with them? Has anybody maligned you? You don't fit in. You don't belong. **Part of the sadness of the hour is that Christians fit beautifully into the world.** Nobody's troubled by their presence, by their conduct, not even troubled by their witness. **Our changed lives should baffle them, and when they do not, we have a reason to be on our faces before God,** seeking that repentance which results in the exchanged mind, so the mind of Christ is dominant in our lives. The next matter: We'll have to give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. They will; you will; I will... There is no escaping our responsibilities before God.

Five Matters Requiring Attention

There is an important arrangement of truth in verses 7 through 11. "The end of all things is at hand," says the inspired apostle. There are certain things that the believer is required to be. I see five matters in these verses that require our distinct attention.

Verse 8: "Keep fervent in your love for one another."

Verse 9: "Be hospitable to one another without complaint." It is easy at a conference like this. We have time to be kind one to another, but what about at home?

Verse 10: "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." Some of us think of stewardship in terms of money, and no doubt if you began to write down those things that fall on the list under the

manifold grace of God, money would appear on the list, but it would be a minor matter in the whole lot. Money is something that is ordinary. It is something we call a common grace. We must not overlook the manifold grace of God, special graces of the believer that require good stewardship.

Verse 11: "Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God." Preachers, when people hear you, do they say, "That is much more than a pastor speaking to us; that is the voice of God"? Some of you are in trouble in churches and people are always giving you a hard time. Learn to speak the utterances of God, and a lot of people who are bold in your face now will become fearful. Every man when he speaks ought to speak with the fear of God hanging over him and over his auditors.

And the next instruction says, "Whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies." All these things that God might be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the dominion forever and ever.

The Immediate Context

Now, the more immediate context, starting at verse 12: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you...." What is he referring to? Look at verses 17 and 18: "It is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?"

Verse 13: "...to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation." In verse 14 we are called to consider these facts: "If you are reviled for the Name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you."

It would be foolish to suppose that every Christian suffers the same degree of persecution. Our place in life is going to have some contributing factors in terms of degree of persecution, but we have it plain here that you are blessed when you are reviled for the name of Christ, "...because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you."

Verse 15: But "by no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler..." You begin to sense the context. Do you see how verses 17 and 18 fit in? Suffering as a Christian (verse 16) is not something about which we ought to be ashamed. Rather in the name of our dear Lord Jesus, let us bring glory to God.

Verse 19: "Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right." So no matter how hard it is

to be saved, let us get on with the work for which we were called, to the life to which we were born of the Spirit of God.

It Is Time for Judgment

Let's take the text now. Verse 17: "It is time for judgment to begin with the household of God." Some of us have a very inadequate understanding of Scripture because we have a very inadequate understanding of judgment. I'm regularly encountering people in the church, who, when the word judgment is used, think usually in terms of the future—like the Great White Throne Judgment. **This passage is not talking about something in the future.** When the Bible speaks about the judgment of God, we need to be certain whether it is talking about something eschatological or something for the moment. In this passage, the judgment that is under consideration is something that occurs on a day by day basis. "It is time for judgment..." That was written a long time ago, and Peter was sure that it was an appropriate time for judgment then. It is even more appropriate now. There is simply no escaping the fact that part and parcel of being a true believer is the issue of judgment. **A major reason why we so desperately need revival is that the biblical subject of judgment has been set aside and treated as a matter of inconsequence for the believer.**

But not only is the timing of judgment called to our attention here, but also the subjects of judgment are clearly pinpointed. As noted already, the place where judgment must begin: "It is time for judgment to begin with the household of God." In actual fact, if one has a very literal translation, they know that what this passage says is that the time has come for judgment to begin *from* the household of God. It is not something that is contained within the household of faith. It is something that begins there and moves on out. That is a very important aspect of the teaching of this passage.

We need to observe that the word under consideration here is *judgment*, not punishment. Christ already bore your punishment. The world is facing judgment in the sense of penalty. The judgment of the believers described here is for the purpose of refinement, purification. We can be greatly moved in a conference like this and set our hearts to be more pure. We may need some reminders in the days to come, and the Lord is going to use His judgments as reminders and aids.

When we're speaking of judgments that are concurrent with sin, we need to be thinking in three realms. **First, every believer needs to learn to judge himself.** The reason why we get such a pileup of iniquity within the church is because so many believers have failed to judge themselves.

Secondly, we must also think in terms of the church as the judge. It is God's plan that each church should judge its own people. You can barely say that before someone says, "My Bible says, 'Judge not lest ye be judged.'" My Bible says, "Judge righteous judgment" (John 7:24). It says, "With what judgment you judge, you shall be judged" (Matt. 7:2). There is no hint in the Bible that we are not to judge. We dare not judge unfairly. **We must not be more severe with others than we are with ourselves.** So when we are thinking of judgment concurrent with sin, we are thinking of the individual judging himself; we're thinking in terms of the church judging the individual that won't judge himself. And obviously we are thinking in terms of God. **If the individual won't judge himself and that individual's church won't judge him, God will.**

Some of you pastors, if you're going to follow through on your engagement with God this week, are going to have to go home and exercise some judgments, first, on yourself. When you are right in every realm, then you're going to have to deal with some of those people in your church who need godly, gracious, loving, tender judgment. Judgment must begin with the household of faith.

Many of us are familiar with the passage of 1 Corinthians 11, starting with verse 27: "Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world."

If perpetually you will not judge yourself, there is strong reason to suppose that you're going to be judged along with the world because the repentant person who has the exchanged mind, has no interest in sin. Oh, he fails; he commits sin. He may work terrible iniquity, but he has the mind-set of the Spirit and **he judges himself with severity lest he be judged along with the world.** In first Corinthians 5:5, Paul is dealing with the immorality in the Corinthian Church and he sums it up by saying, "I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." My brothers in ministry, you in all likelihood have people in your church who need judgment so that their spirit may be chastened and their soul may be saved.

I want to give seven biblical examples of judgment. Before I do, I want to give you

these summary kind of biblical statements. The first I am reading from Exodus 19:21: "The Lord spoke to Moses, 'Go down, warn the people, lest they break through to the Lord to gaze, and many of them perish. And also let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them.'" That is what I want you to have in mind as we pursue this subject further: "Lest the Lord break out among them."

If I won't judge myself, and my church doesn't have the courage to judge me, I warn you, the Lord will break out among us! The Lord already has broken out among us! We've been seeing the hand of God in judgment for years now. There has been the withdrawal of the manifest presence of God. I mention Jeremiah, chapter 13, how that God, when He is grieved with the wickedness of His people when they will not judge themselves and one another, turns them over to a state of spiritual drunkenness. The judgments of God are manifold. Judge yourself. Judge appropriately others, lest the Lord break out among you.

Listen to these solemn words in Hebrews 12:25: "See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven." The words cited a while ago, "lest the Lord break out among you"—were words spoken on earth, but take care lest the voice of God from heaven warns, for our God is a consuming fire. Is it any wonder that the psalmist said in Psalm 119:26, "My flesh trembles for fear of thee, and I am afraid of thy judgments."

Let us again look at the text in verses 17 and 18: "Let judgment begin with the household of God and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome of those who do not obey the Gospel of God? And if it is with difficulty that the righteous are saved"—or your version may say, "if the righteous are scarcely saved..." That seems to imply: if they are just saved by the skin of their teeth, if they just barely make it. Would that not be a terrible statement against Christ? Is Christ's atoning work barely sufficient? No, it is altogether adequate. It is superabundant in its ability to save any and all. This passage is not dealing with believers just barely making it into the eternal Kingdom.

Look at the wording: "If the righteous..." This text is suggesting: if those who have been made righteous, if those already justified, are still being saved with difficulty.... What does it mean? Well, it's hard going judging yourself day in and day out, month after month, year after year, unceasingly judging yourself. It is even harder to judge others righteously. If the church will not judge itself, if judgment

does not begin in the household of faith, the question is asked, what hope is there for the ungodly and the sinner? Do you realise the contribution the church has made to the eternal death of the unbelieving world, by our refusal to judge ourselves? By the refusal of the church to judge its people, we have made it increasingly difficult when it is already difficult enough, for the ungodly and the sinners to judge themselves.

Seven Illustrations

There are seven illustrations which are extremely consequential. The first is found in Leviticus 9 and 10. God had been meeting His people in a profoundly powerful fashion, and then two of Aaron's sons wanted to get in on the act. We read, "Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, 'It is what the Lord spoke saying, "By those who come near me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honoured.'" These two brothers took strange fire. Somebody wants to know, "Were they really believers?" How do I know? They were sons of Aaron and they were in the priesthood. God demands that we all without any exceptions treat Him as holy, and God insists that before all the people we honour the Lord.

Some present the strange fire of unholy jokes in the pulpit. Some use as illustrations stuff from the television the night before, and while they are there to call people from the world, they're feeding them the world, when they're supposed to be feeding them the Word of God. Strange fire.

God judged Moses for his loss of self-control. In the last verses of Deuteronomy, chapter 32 we read, "The Lord spoke to Moses that very same day, saying, go up to this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab opposite Jericho, and look at the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the sons of Israel for a possession. Then die on the mountain where you ascend, and be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people, because you broke faith with me..."

What did Moses do? God had said to him in the midst of a murmuring people, "Speak to the rock" (Nu. 20:8). But Moses was in an

agitated spirit. He let the mean spiritedness and murmuring attitudes of the people touch him. So he grabbed hold of the rod and whacked the rock, and judgment fell on Moses. In Numbers 20:12 there is a powerful statement about this, and God said to Moses, "At this place, at the Waters of Meribah, where you were supposed to maintain my holiness before the people, you didn't maintain it. And now, Moses, I want you to understand, I'm going to maintain it. But I'll maintain it at your expense."

People who read these passages in Numbers and Deuteronomy ask, "Are you suggesting that Moses went to hell?" No, I'm not suggesting he went to hell. But that is no relief for anyone who has a change of mind, whose mind-set is the glory of God. If I steal from the glory of God, that's worse to the believer than going to hell, because the purpose for my existence has been defeated when I sin and rob God of His glory. **May we have a renewed realisation of our duty to maintain God's holiness before the people and to uphold His glory before all, and may our heart be set to maintain it so that God is not forced to maintain it at our expense.** It's time for judgment to begin in the household of faith.

The third illustration is in Judges, chapters 13-16—the account of Samson. His birth was announced by angels. His parents were informed that he was to be a Nazarite from the womb, that he was to drink no strong wine, that he was to eat no unclean thing, and that his hair was not to be shaved. We read of times when the Spirit of God came upon him, but most of us remember that season in Samson's life when he fooled around with Delilah. Delilah made him sleep on her knees. She called a man to shave off the seven locks of his hair and she said, "The Philistines are upon you!" He woke from his sleep and roused himself, intending to go out and shake himself as before, but he didn't know the Spirit of the Lord had left him. I'm afraid lest some preacher here be in that circumstance of not knowing that the Spirit of the Lord has already left him. **It is time for judgment to begin in the household of faith.**

Place in your mind the story of Eli and his sons. The priest Eli grew grossly fat by eating the things his sons were forbidden to touch. Then came that day when he sat on his stool and news came that the ark of God had been taken by the Philistines, and this priest, Eli, fell backward off his stool and broke his neck. There was not a man of his

descendants who lived to any age or who ever occupied that glorious position he held. **He didn't judge himself, and God was forced to judge him.**

Think of David. There is a long account of David in 1 Chronicles, chapters 13 through 17, and then a much shorter account in 2 Samuel, chapter 6, when David sought to bring the ark of God back to Jerusalem. A boy reached up to steady the ark when it hit the rough place in the road, and God struck the boy down. David was angry and he called the place "Perezuzzah"—the Lord has made a breach on us. Why? Neither David nor the priest had judged themselves. David wanted to bring the Ark of God home, but he didn't go to the Scriptures to find out how to do it. Instead of carrying it on the shoulders of the Kohites, they built a new cart and carried it the way the Philistines did.

David did not maintain God's holiness among the people. God had to maintain it at David's expense. David was not struck dead. It was Uzzah. That's one of the amazing things about God. **It may be someone near you who gets struck down because of your sin.** God may have some higher purpose for you, as he had for David.

A sixth illustration is the King of Judah, Uzziah. He was 16 years of age when he became king. In his early days he did everything right in the sight of the Lord. God blessed him, and we read, "When he became strong, his heart was lifted up with pride." He wouldn't judge himself. God had to judge him. When he was in the Temple misbehaving, doing something he had no right to do, leprosy appeared on his forehead, and his kingly rule was over (2 Chron. 26:16-23).

Turn to Acts 5 and read afresh the story of Ananias and Sapphira. They agreed together to deceive the Church and the Lord. Brothers and Sisters, it is time for judgment to begin in the household of faith. It will be with great difficulty that we are saved, but if we choose the easy road instead of the hard road of holiness, what will happen to the ungodly and sinners? What will happen is happening! They are dying by the millions and a powerless Church under the judgment of God is unable to help them.

Is there some area of your life that needs judgment? Let us bow before God and judge ourselves and put away sin.

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Men God Wants

God is not looking for brilliant men, is not depending upon eloquent men, is not shut up to the use of talented men in sending His Gospel out in the world. God is looking for broken men, for men who have judged themselves in the light of the Cross of Christ. When He wants anything done, He takes up men who have come to an end of themselves, and whose trust and confidence is not in themselves but in God.

—H. A. Ironside