

THE DAY OF PUNISHMENT AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD – SAMUEL WHITEFIELD

³⁴*Now therefore, go, lead the people to the place of which I have spoken to you. Behold, My Angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit for punishment, I will visit punishment upon them for their sin.” (Exodus 32:34 NKJV)*

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. In Exodus 32:34, God gives Moses a sober warning concerning Israel’s sin in the Golden Calf – a day will come when He visits Israel for punishment. This verse can be easily passed over, but within it is the summary of how God will deal with Israel and the nations.
- B. We have to consider what had just happened in the wilderness. God had just done something never done before, or since, in history. He personally brought the nation of Israel up out of Egypt with unequalled signs and wonders. In the desert, His presence came down and shook Mount Sinai in the presence of all the people. He spoke audibly to a nation and made covenant with them. It was so tender to God that He refers to this period of time as the day He “betrothed” or “married” Israel in the wilderness (Jeremiah 2:2; Hosea 2:15).
- C. After all that happened, while Moses was meeting with God, Israel formed and fashioned an idol, a golden calf. The nation then worshipped this idol and gave affection to - going so far as to give this idol credit for delivering them from Egypt. Israel was committing the great sin of all men. We take the pleasures and provision of God and ascribe it either to demon gods, gods of our imaginations, or ourselves. This sin plagues fallen men. Is the blazing sun, or the presence of water, or food any less glorious than the deliverance from Egypt? And yet we take little thought for God’s consistent care of us. Instead we make gods for ourselves. At times we even seek to understand God in a way that He has not made Himself known and that itself can become idolatry.
- D. From God’s perspective, He had just made a marriage covenant with Israel and Israel was committing adultery while she was still on the honeymoon. Israel’s sin was agonizing and deeply personal to YHWH. They rejected the creator and worshipped a god of their own making rather than keep their marriage covenant with Him. He had joined Himself to the nation in a way that no doubt the angels could not comprehend, but as Israel gave herself to adultery right after her deliverance, the angels waited with baited breath to see what YHWH would do. How would He respond?

II. THE DAY OF PUNISHMENT

- A. To be true to Himself, YHWH had to judge Israel’s adultery, and all the cosmos watched to see if YHWH would be true to His own law. Would He judge the sin of a people even though it was the people He had joined Himself to? Would He be true to Himself and His covenant?
- B. As angels hung on every word, YHWH spoke to Moses. Even though they had rejected Him, YHWH would continue to go before the nation to secure their promised inheritance. The nation had received mercy. Their sin was so great that God’s presence would remain distant (Exodus 32:34; 33:2-3), but He would fulfill His promises to them (Exodus 32:34; 33:2). However, He must be true to Himself. The day of punishment would come. However, it would not happen in that generation. He would visit for punishment on the nation at a future day and time.

- C. YHWH showed His nature. He would be true to Himself and judgment would come; however, mercy would precede judgment. He is the God who keeps covenant and shows mercy.
⁹“Therefore know that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments; (Deuteronomy 7:9 NKJV)”
- D. The day of punishment would surely come, but it would be a later day. A day would come, in the final years of this age, when God would visit Israel in a final punishment for all her sins. It will be Israel’s most severe hour of punishment (Jeremiah 30:7; Ezekiel 5:8, 9, 14), but also the final end of her punishment. It will be unequalled but also brief and after this He will transform her into the most glorious nation on the earth.
- E. To emphasize the certainty of the day of punishment, God sent a plague among the people (Exodus 32:35). This plague was not the day of punishment because it was not according to the requirements of rebellion against the covenant, but it was a sober warning that the day of punishment would come.

III. THE MERCY OF GOD IN THE DAY OF PUNISHMENT

- A. Once we understand the certainly and the futurity of the day of punishment, it reveals the nature of God in an astounding way. First, God is always true to Himself. He owes the cosmos an expression of how He feels about sin and whether He will judge the cosmos rightly.
1. This is why He cannot simply “overlook” sin, which is nothing less than rebellion against His leadership.
 2. When a child rebels against his father’s leadership and there is no punishment, it enforces in the child’s mind that the father’s leadership is not real and it demonstrates to all who are watching that the father is not serious about his leadership and care for the son.
- B. The cosmos has been watching God for thousands of years. How will He respond to the rebellion of creation? Is His leadership real and tangible? If it is, God must punish rebellion to His leadership and demonstrate that His leadership is real. He owes this to creation if creation is to have any tangible knowledge of what is true.
- C. God promises that He will send His angel before Israel and even drive out the nations before Israel (Exodus 33:2). Though Israel has committed adultery, God will not break His marriage vows (Malachi 2:16). Instead, He will remain faithful.
1. He warns that His presence cannot draw near simply because if He is to draw near, just because of who He is, He will break out in judgment against the nation.
 2. He does not want to destroy Israel, so He withdraws His presence, delays judgment, and promises to continue to fulfill His promises to the nation.
 3. If we understand the gravity of Israel's sin, this response of mercy is shocking.

- D. When we feel the full weight of Israel's sin, the mercy God showed to the nation is beyond all comprehension. When we understand the reasons why He determined to delay punishment until the end of the age, it becomes even more astounding.
1. He delays punishment until there is an accomplished atonement and a Savior that Israel can quickly call on in the day of punishment. He waits for the Passover Lamb to be slain on behalf of Israel so that He might pass over Israel's sin again just as He did in the Egypt. However, just as in Egypt, the Jews will have to apply this blood.
 2. He will delay punishment until the good news of that Savior is broadcast to the entire earth and there are gentile peoples in every nation who will speak to Israel about that Savior and remind her of her covenant destiny.
 3. In addition to the witness in the nations, there will also be an increasing number of Jews who receive mercy and proclaim God's chosen Deliverer to their own people before the day of punishment.
 4. All of this is why God waits for the "fullness of the gentiles" to provoke Israel to her Savior before He deals with Israel in punishment (Deuteronomy 32:21; Isaiah 65:1-2; Matthew 24:14-15; Romans 11:11, 25-26). He wants Israel surrounded, no matter where she is, by a witness of the Savior so that, in the day of punishment, she can cry out quickly to the One who has made atonement for all her sin and receive mercy instead of the judgment due.
- E. Delayed judgment is God's ultimate mercy to Israel. He will not bring her final judgment until every possible option for mercy is in place. He does not consider it extravagant to wait thousands of years for Israel's day of punishment until there is a remnant in every tribe and tongue who can minister His faithfulness and love to Israel in their hour of punishment.
- F. His Son will bear their sin first and then He will create a global context where, no matter where she is in the earth, Israel will not be able to escape the tender love of YHWH and the consistent witness of mercy in the hour of her most severe punishment. He will spend thousands of years preparing the nations so that Israel can be surrounded by the opportunity for mercy in one moment. In this way He can be true both to bring judgment and display His great mercy. This is the very thing that caused Paul to cry out over the mercy of God in His judgments.
- ³³*Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! (Romans 11:33 NKJV)*
- G. His delayed punishment is His longsuffering towards Israel so that as many as possible can be saved.
- ⁹*The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9 NKJV)*

IV. THE IS THE STORY OF ALL THE NATIONS

- A. While the promise and warning of Exodus 32:34 are specifically directed to Israel and will be literally fulfilled, Israel's story also illustrates how God has dealt with the nations. As with Israel's rebellion, God must ultimately answer man's rebellion in a day of punishment. He must bring punishment if His leadership over the cosmos is real. He must be true to Himself so that the cosmos might know what is true.
- B. However, just as with Israel, He continues to display His kindness and long-suffering even in practical ways. He continues to send rain both to the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45) in the season of delay before the judgment. He operates in mercy and gives men time for repentance (2 Peter 3:9). He will even ensure that the warning of the coming judgment and the invitation for mercy is extended to every nation before He comes in judgment (Matthew 24:14).
- C. Just as He did to Israel in sending a plague, He will be faithful to bring temporal judgments periodically to warn men that a final day of punishment is coming. He will bring the strongest empires down to the ashes to remind all men of their frailty and of the certain end of the greatest powers of this age.
- D. Though Israel's judgment is severe, it is unto her glory. However, when He judges the nations, it will be even more severe than His judgment of Israel. Though He will melt Israel in His fury (Ezekiel 22:20-22), He will bring her through the furnace (Malachi 3:3-4) and into glory. However, the nations have no such hope. His fury will come against the nations and they will be utterly destroyed (Isaiah 34:2).

V. THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

- A. We must realize that the knowledge of God is revealed in the judgments of God if our knowledge of God is to be true. We tend to overlook or avoid this part of God's personality, but, when we do this, we end up with an image of God that is incomplete at best or in our own image at worst. If we are to know God as God, we must know God in His judgments. The manner in which He judges reveals Him in a way that no other context does.
- B. In the fire of His judgments we both find that God will be true to His nature and His word. We also find that He delays these judgments, faithfully warns about them, and provides an atonement for the repentant in order to demonstrate His great mercy. Both His mercy and His judgment must be taken seriously because both are serious. It is His commitment both to truth and to mercy that are beyond even the comprehension of the apostle Paul. When we see God as He truly is, both His judgments and His mercy will cause us to explode in worship along with the apostle.
³¹even so these also have now been disobedient, that through the mercy shown you they also may obtain mercy. ³²For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all. ³³Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! ³⁴“For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?” (Romans 11:31–34 NKJV)