

Hebrews 6.1-3 Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, <sup>2</sup> and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. <sup>3</sup> And this we will do if God permits.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. <sup>48</sup> When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. <sup>49</sup> So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous <sup>50</sup> and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mat. 13.47-50).

## Introduction

In Hebrews 6.1-3, there are six elementary things that we are to transcend in the sense of going more fully into the fullness that they each represent foundationally (Heb. 6.1, **Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity**). The six elements are repentance, faith, washings, laying on of hands, resurrection, and judgment. So far in this series, we have covered the first five items on this list. Now let us consider some things about transcending the basics of the sixth item, eternal judgment. We will cover this subject in two steps: understanding eternal judgment in its elements, and transcending eternal judgment in its application.

### 1A. Understanding eternal judgment in its elements

This is a difficult topic, so, we need to secure the foundation. We need to make sure that the basics from the teachings of Christ are securely in place. For a subject like this, we definitely need His word on it.

There are some key texts: in the Gospels, we have the wheat/tares, good/bad fish, and sheep/goats narratives. In the book of Hebrews, this doctrine is very God-centered calling Him “a consuming fire.” In the book of Revelation, the great white throne epitomizes the holy standard by which the king of glory will judge all people. These texts bring up some questions to answer and difficulties to hurdle and we cannot deal with all of them. Our attention will be on the parable of the fish net: **Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. <sup>48</sup> When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. <sup>49</sup> So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous <sup>50</sup> and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mat. 13.47-50).**

In this parable, Jesus emphasizes some basic realities that hang over us in the fullness of our existence on this earth. We should meditate in earnest on these weighty truths and soak them into our thoughts, right through the emotional aversion that we are likely to have to them. Four points will give us a sobering grasp of eternal judgment as to its elements.

#### 1B. First, eternal judgment involves the separation of the wicked from the righteous

It strikes the mind like a point of an arrow to hear that the kingdom of heaven is like this story of a fishing “expedition.” The kind of fishing in view is not that of a man with a fishing pole who casts his line out into the river hoping to reel in a particular fish. Instead, the picture is that of a drag net, a large net that you submerge into the water and pull along behind the boat, or perhaps between two boats. Here you gather many fish of diverse kinds; you are not fishing for bass or any other specific kind of fish. No, you seek to gather many kinds of fish. Jesus says that the kingdom comes in this way of gathering and pulling all kinds of fish to the shore where men sit and sort through them, putting the good into containers and throwing away the bad (13.47-48). In other words, you separate the bad fish from the good fish when you come to the end of the fishing expedition.

Jesus goes on to say that this story illustrates what will happen at the end of the age: **The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous (13.49b**, per the separation of the bad fish from the good fish). His word speaks to a question asked of me recently: “Do you believe that when you die you go to be with your loved ones who are dead?” My answer was this: “That is a yes and no because there is both heaven and hell and it depends on where the loved ones are and

where you are going to be. Not everyone who claims to be a Christian is one. Only people who abide in Christ like a branch in a vine are genuine disciples bound for heaven.”

On the reality of heaven and hell, we should take good note of what is going to happen: the angels will take evil persons away from the righteous (literally, “out from their midst”). That is a promise of blessing to the believer. Separation from the wicked by taking the wicked away from the righteous is an aspect of kingdom salvation. We can take heart in knowing that a day is coming when the afflictions believers endure from those who oppose Christ will disappear. When Jesus comes, He will give His people access to the tree of life in the city of God, but others will be “outside”: **“Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood”** (Rev 22.15). Man’s inhumanity to man will then be “a thing of the past.” This has to be part of how God will dwell with His people and **“wipe away every tear from their eyes”** when **“death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away”** (Rev 21.4).

One of the afflictions of the Christian life is the opposition that Christians face with unbelievers in their midst. Another is the temptation to sin that unbelievers place in front of believers. Moreover, a biting affliction occurs when the righteous by faith observe those around them making light of the person and work of Christ. However, a day is coming when our Lord will separate the unrighteous from the righteous. That is a freedom of a marvelous sort. That is part of what makes heaven a place of happiness, peace, and freedom. It is also part of what makes hell a place of punishment. Hell is to be outside of the fellowship with God and His family.

2B. Second, eternal judgment involves the eternal punishment of the wicked

We must address this topic with a deep sense of awe as we encounter an awesome truth. Moreover, it is a good reminder to note that we should be cautious about speculation. We can misread the text if we let our imaginations excogitate notions about the final place of condemnation. However, we can follow the details that we have in front of us in the text.

Jesus says that the separation will occur by the casting of the wicked into a furnace of fire. The angels will **throw them into the fiery furnace** (Mat. 13.50a). We must be careful to avoid being overly literal here because this is fire “in darkness” (Mat. 8.12), fire that is “unquenchable” (Mat 3.12), and fire that is “eternal” (Mat. 25.41). That is not normal fire! The intent of this language of the fiery furnace surely is to impress us with the intensity of the punishment. That is, a distinctive about fire, about what happens to a person when he or she gets too close to fire, is the abiding quality of the pain it inflicts. Long after a burn, you feel a burning sensation. If you put butter on a burned finger or put it under cold water, the relief is only momentary, and the burning sensation returns and abides. Being “cast into the fiery furnace” indicates some of the scope of the punishment because it is not simply part of the person that suffers, but the entire person. The loss here is total and abiding!

Therefore, because of the abiding nature of the punishment, there is weeping.

God dwells with His people and wipes away every tear, but, for those who are outside, it is a different story. The passage clearly states the fact of conscious suffering, anguish, and sorrow upon sorrow. The gnashing of teeth speaks obviously; of what a person often does when in extreme pain. It may also indicate intense anger that shows the depth of the stubbornly unrepentant heart.

3B. Third, eternal judgment reveals the exceeding sinfulness of sin

When we look at the punishment for sin haltingly, carefully, and prayerfully, we cannot help but see the wrong that sin really is. There is infinite offense, infinite sin against the infinitely holy God of heaven and earth. The consequence is infinite punishment. Thus, as Jesus puts it, **“these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life”** (Mat 25.46). This reveals to us the exceeding sinfulness of sin.

My mind resists going down this path: the thought of eternal, abiding, conscious, unending, suffering is difficult to bear. I must turn as soon as possible to the gospel solution to

the horrifying punishment of eternal judgment. Confronted with this teaching, I must move quickly to the side of my elder Brother for His comfort and guidance. I cannot joke about final judgment; nor can I use the word “hell” in a light and common way. My heart misses a beat when I hear someone say: “I’ll be damned.” If you understand this awful truth in even the most elementary way, then you will cringe to hear someone say, “To hell with you,” “damn you,” or “God damn you.” People who practice this kind of speech (or who think this way) are most likely on the broad road that leads to destruction.

It is truly the case that the theme of coming judgment comes to us most fully from the lips of Christ our wise, loving, and gentle Savior. That seems so fitting given the terror of the Day of Judgment; it is fitting that we learn such weighty truth at the feet of our risen Lord.

4B. Fourth, eternal judgment indicates the way of escape

Salvation (the way of escape from eternal judgment) is by submission to the king of heaven’s kingdom.

In this connection, what is the kingdom of heaven that is comparable to a fishing expedition? This phrase is equivalent to the kingdom of God and it refers to God’s redemptive program by which we have restoration from the fall into sin. It includes restoration to the reign of God over sinners. The connection of *redemption* with a *kingdom* highlights the significant fact that the kingdom of God involves the restoration of fallen man to a place of submission to God as king, of submission from the heart to the Lordship of Christ. Those who are “poor in spirit” and who thus acknowledge their spiritual poverty have the kingdom of heaven as their possession (Mat 5.3). They are children of the kingdom (Mat. 13.38) that belongs to Christ (13.41). Hence, submission in everything to the Lordship of Christ is man’s fundamental duty: **if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.** <sup>10</sup> **For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved** (Rom. 10.9-10).

## 2A. Transcending judgment in its application

In its central thrust, the parable says something about the wicked and the righteous as categories, about *all* the wicked and *all* the righteous that will be separated at the close of the age: <sup>49</sup> **So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous <sup>50</sup> and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth** (Mat. 13.49-50). The gospel gathers all humanity into its net. This takes place in the time before the end of history; the gathering goes on until the time of separation on the seashore of eternity. *The “evil” are sinners* who do not submit to Christ in faith and repentance: *the “righteous” are sinners* who do submit to Christ in faith and repentance.

How does the gospel affect all people in this universal way? The answer to this question helps us go beyond eternal judgment in light of the history of redemption. We can lay this answer out in steps.

1) Step one: we transcend judgment when we apply the fact of national universalism.

There is a national universalism to the gospel in the present time. In other words, the wall of division between Jew and Gentile is no longer present. We reveal our immaturity if we cannot handle this fact properly. There has been this great move from OT Jewish particularism to NT national universalism. It is hard to deny the ease of the move from “all kinds” of fish to “all nations” of men. Therefore, the Hebrew Christian readers of the book of Hebrews and all readers (then and now) must transcend any hints of Jewish exclusivism. This is not anti-Jewish; it is pro-all nations composed of Jew and Gentile alike.

2) Step two: we transcend judgment when we pray for not against our enemies

Our enemies are God’s enemies; God’s enemies are our enemies. In the OT, God taught His people about the judgment that is coming on His enemies through imprecatory Psalms. These are Psalms that pronounce and pray for curses to fall on the ungodly (cf. **Ps. 69.22-26: <sup>22</sup> Let their own table before them become a snare; and when they are at peace, let it become a trap. <sup>23</sup> Let their eyes be darkened, so that they cannot see, and make their loins tremble continually. <sup>24</sup> Pour out your indignation upon them,**

and let your burning anger overtake them. <sup>25</sup> May their camp be a desolation; let no one dwell in their tents. <sup>26</sup> For they persecute him whom you have struck down, and they recount the pain of those you have wounded). Now, the coming of Christ made a major shift in the history of salvation. We no longer pray the imprecatory Psalms, at least, not without much interpretation. We no longer pray for the cursing of the ungodly. Instead, we pray for their salvation and blessing (cf. **Mat. 5.44-45: <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust**). To that end, we pray for laborers into the harvest to spread the word to the nations for blessing and not cursing (Lk. 10.2; Mat. 9.38).

The gospel goes to the nations like a Sower sowing seed. Therefore, with the delay of final judgment in mind per the weeds parable (**let both grow until the harvest**, Mat. 13.30), we know that the nations have the gospel instead of fiery judgment in the coming of the kingdom in Christ.

3) Step three: we transcend judgment when we recognize that Christ is Lord of all

If people are going to be saved, Jesus must save them (**And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved**, Acts 4.12). He is the Savior of all men, which means that He is the only Savior (**For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe**, 1 Tim 4.10). He is the judge of all men. He will raise all people from the dead, some to life and some to death.

Just think of how Christ is Lord of all. He governs history and all people are in His kingdom because of His enthronement as Sabbath king by the resurrection (Acts 2.36). Thus, people cannot make Him Lord of their lives. He is their Lord; He is their Savior. If they are going to be saved He must save them for He is the only Savior. They must acknowledge His Lordship and submit themselves to Him. We are truly immature in our claim to faith if we do not understand this aspect of His saving work.

#### Concluding remarks

1) The parable of the fish net draws you to face the some heavy truths

The parable confronts you with the claims of life and death, of safety or peril with regard to your total existence, body and soul, now and forever. Unmistakably, Jesus stresses the fact of the separation of unbelievers from believers that will take place on the shore's edge of eternity. A point in time will arrive when Jesus will pull the fish net onto the shore. Eternal judgment encompasses all kinds of fish, all kinds of people: Jews, Gentiles, wicked, and righteous; it includes every human being. Jesus will place some people on His right hand and some on His left. The parable of the fish net accents the fact of punishment that results in weeping and gnashing of teeth. You must never forget this dark fact. Still, and radically important here, the gospel promise is that the righteous will shine as the sun (Mat. 13.43). How can this be so? It is true because Christ endured the infinite punishment in their place by paying all that He had to purchase them as a pearl that cost Him His very life (Mat. 13.45-46; cf. 1 Pet 2.24). Everything depends on His work alone. You have righteousness because of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Without Him, you have eternal judgment.

2) The parable encourages you to responsible action in a compelling way

Against the dark backdrop, the gospel shines like a marvelous diamond. The encouragement is to buy the field for the treasure (13.44), to seize the kingdom as a prize, to press into the kingdom, to submit yourself to Christ as your king, to take His yoke upon you, to believe in Him and receive eternal life. Thus, righteous people are those who are clothed in the righteousness of Christ by submitting themselves to Him and His word. They are "unrighteous righteous" ones. They embrace His word for dear life, for salvation, and as an authoritative guide regarding how to live on this earth in obedience to God. Therefore, be assured, you have the treasure of righteousness by entrusting yourself to Jesus Christ the Lord of history. As Jesus said, he that believes has eternal life and shall never die; he that believes not has the wrath of God abiding on him (Jn. 3.36; 11.25-27).

<sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her [Martha], "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" <sup>27</sup> She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world" (Jn. 11.25-27).

3) The parable motivates you to gospel mission

We have the job of spreading the word by casting it like a fish net into the sea. This balances our thinking about the warning to avoid casting gospel pearls before swine. We are to be sensitive to dog-like and pig-like responses to our message, but we are to spread the word as best we can to all men everywhere. Belief in the doctrine of sovereign election is not a detriment to this task. Indeed, election is a further encouragement for we go to the blind, deaf, leprous, and the spiritually dead. God has a people and He will save them. He has a method of saving them, which is the casting of the gospel net into a sea of fallen sinners, embracing all men everywhere indiscriminately, and working effectively in the hearts of His elect people by that gospel.

Gospel proclamation is word proclamation. It is seed sowing and fish net casting. Example is crucial but word is essential. Therefore, your neighbor is everyman before whom you are to live the gospel and to whom you are to speak the gospel as God enables you for the glory and honor of our risen Lord and Sabbath king.

Accordingly, it may help you to examine how you transcend eternal judgment by how you answer the following questions for reflection and prayerful study.

- 1) Do I believe I have been spared eternal punishment?
- 2) Does this belief take hold of me to such an extent that I always have a thankfulness of heart to the Lord for the forgiveness of sins He gave me by grace?
- 3) Am I concerned for the lost? Do I love my neighbor? Do I believe that people without Christ are perishing in their sins? What can I do for them for their eternal benefit?
- 4) What does it mean to know the fear of the Lord and thus to persuade men?
- 5) Do I fear the Lord in awe of His holy justice and does this reverential fear spill over to fear for my neighbors, family, and friends?

**Let us bow down before the Lord Jesus Christ acknowledging His Sabbath Lordship and universal sovereignty. In true humility, let us thank Him for enduring eternal punishment in our place and let us praise Him for making Himself known to us by the effectual working of the gospel that is like a fish net embracing all people in the accomplishment of His sovereign will. May the Holy Spirit give us a love for the lost to such an extent that, in light of eternal judgment, we fear for their eternal safety and boldly point them to the risen Lord Jesus Christ. To Him be all glory, amen.**