

## THE RETRIBUTIVE CHARACTER OF DIVINE LAW

**"Be not deceived: God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap." – Gal. 6:7.**

THE APOSTLE PAUL here, addressing the Church, announces a principle of Divine Law which is applicable not only to the Church, but to all men everywhere. Hosea expresses the same truth, saying that if we sow to the wind we shall reap the whirlwind. (Hos. 8:7.) Solomon says, if we sow iniquity, we reap vanity. (Prov. 22:8.) St. Paul says, if we sow sparingly, we reap sparingly, and if we sow bountifully, we reap bountifully. (2 Cor. 9:6.) This is equally true, whether we sow wild oats or good wheat.

It is in view of the harvest of the world's sowing, that we are informed that "the eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good" (Prov. 15:3); that "God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Ecc. 12:14); and that "there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed, neither hid that shall not be known"; that "whatsoever has been spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light"; and that "spoken in the ear, in closets, shall be proclaimed upon the housetops [openly]." (Luke 12:2,3.) And again we read "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, saith the Lord." – Rom. 12:19.

But when will this reckoning time come? for now, as saith the Prophet Malachi (3:15), men "call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered." With the Psalmist (Psa. 94:3,4) we inquire, "Lord, how long shall the wicked triumph, and all the workers of iniquity boast themselves?" The Apostle Paul answers that the Lord "hath appointed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom He hath ordained," – The Christ. (Acts 17:31.) And "then," says the Prophet Malachi to those who fear the Lord and whom He hath chosen as His

jewels, "shall ye return and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth Him not." – Mal. 3:18.

But take heed. The same Prophet raises a suggestive question, which all would do well to ponder. He asks, "Who may abide the day of His coming? and who shall stand when He appeareth? for He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap...And I will come near to you to judgment, and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, and the widow and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not Me, saith the Lord of hosts." – Mal. 3:2,5.

The reference of these Scriptures is to the great judgment of the Day of the Lord – the day of trouble with which this Gospel Dispensation is to close – variously described as a day "of wrath," "of vengeance," "of recompense," and as a "time of trouble such as was not since there was a nation."

But while this great judgment will have to do with the world in general – with nations and corporations and all civil, social and religious organizations of men; and while it will touch the cases of all the individuals living at that time, we naturally inquire where retributive justice came, or is to come in, in dealing with all the generations of the past?

Our Lord answers the question when He says, "The hour is coming in which all that are in the graves shall hear the voice of the Son of Man and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection by judgment." (John 5:28,29; see R.V. and Diaglott.) The whole Millennial Age is thus set forth as a "day" of reckoning, of trial, of judgment. In that searching judgment there will be a reckoning, even for every pernicious word (Matt. 12:36); and by submitting and learning obedience under those judgments, the masses of mankind

who *will* to *obey* are to be gradually raised up to perfection of being, as well as of knowledge.

## RETRIBUTION VS. FORGIVENESS OF SIN

But here a philosophic and important question arises as to the extent to which the *justification* of a sinner, through faith in the precious blood of Christ, and his full consecration to do the Father's will, may intercept the course of the Law, that a man must reap what he has sown. In other words, Will his new relationship to God save him from a miserable harvest of a former sowing of wild oats?

We answer, Yes; in one sense it will. The just penalty for all sin is *death* – the severest penalty that can be inflicted. And from this penalty his justification freely exonerates him. His past iniquities and sins will no more rise up in judgment against him, demanding their just penalty – death; for "blessed are they whose iniquity is forgiven and whose sin is covered; blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute [reckon] sin." (Rom. 4:7,8.) All who by faith in Christ's sacrifice for sin and by consecration of heart and life to God's service come under the Robe of Christ's Righteousness are thus blessed. [R5139 : page 368] The iniquity, or legal sentence, of such is passed altogether or forgiven; and while the results of their sins, the harvest of their misdeeds sown before they came to a realization of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, or to an appreciation of God's mercy in Christ, are still painfully with them, yet they are assured that these are *covered*; that God does not regard them as they really are, but imputes their sins to Christ, who already has paid their penalty, and imputes of His worthiness to their account. They are further assured that God's provision for them is that they may some day be *healed*, or cured, of the weaknesses brought on them through sin and now reckoned as "covered" from the Divine eye.

With the Church these sins, or actual defects, are to be *blotted out* or *wiped out* when the Times of Restitution shall arrive, at the Second Advent of Christ. (Acts 3:19.) The result of this blotting or

wiping out of sin will be new bodies, new beings – free from sin, from imperfection and every consequence and evidence of sin. With the Church, this cleansing and blotting out process begins with the present life, and will be completed early in the Millennial Day (Psa. 46:5) by a share in the First Resurrection.

The world's cleansing time will be the entire Millennial Age, or "Day of Judgment," when those who then shall accept Christ and the New Covenant may gradually be cleansed and healed. At the close of that Age, if faithful to their opportunities, they may be presented blameless and perfect before God, needing no further healing nor cleansing, but each being, as was Adam, a human image of the Divine Creator – a perfect man.

The Scriptures, as well as observation, assure us that our *justification* before God does not remove at once and without our co-operation all the results of previous transgressions. The *harvest* is like in kind to the *sowing*; but the penitent and forgiven one has the promise of grace to help in the battle with his inherited as well as cultivated weaknesses; and so we read (I John 1:9), "God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to *cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" It is in this *cleansing process* which follows vitalized justification that the consecrated believer must of necessity suffer from some of the baneful results of a past course of sin – reap the reward of his former sowing. While the Lord will be very merciful in dealing with him, nevertheless, as a Wise Physician, He will not spare the necessary experience to eradicate the deep-seated evil propensities of long cultivation in the past.

## **RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE THE BASIS OF DIVINE LAW**

Here the retributive character of Divine Law is especially noteworthy. Men often make a distinction between the law of *nature* and the *moral* law, calling the one *natural* and the other *Divine*. But the fixed principles of both are of *Divine origin*, and accomplish the *Divine will* in their *operation*. Both operate on the basis

of retributive justice. All Divine Law, whether of nature or of morals, is but the operation of certain fixed principles of righteousness, having for their object the peace and happiness of all intelligent creatures under its jurisdiction. Obedience to this Law brings its reward of happiness, while any interference with it incurs its certain penalty.

If you hold your hand *before* the fire, it will be warmed, and your comfort and happiness will be thus ministered to; if you put your hand *into* the fire, it will be burned, and you will suffer pain. Thus the law of nature, which was designed to comfort and bless us, is also prepared to punish us if we *violate its proper use*. And not only so, but it is prepared to grade its penalties in proportion to the aggravation of the offense against it.

If you put your hand into the fire for a very short time, it will be *scorched*; persist a little longer, and it will be *blistered*; and a little longer still, and it will be *consumed*. Applied properly to the cooking of your food, fire will reward you with a savory meal; but applied improperly, it may render the food undesirable or unfit for use. Water, also one of our greatest blessings, becomes, if the law of nature be disregarded, an agent of death and destruction. So throughout the laws of nature we might trace retribution.

In the realm of moral law, the case is the same. If you violate the principles of righteousness, you deface the image of God in your being. Impure thoughts write in clearly legible signs upon the countenance the dark lines of a bad character; while pure, just and noble thoughts illuminate the countenance and render the pure character transparent to beholders. And the operations of moral law are as sure and reliable as are those of natural law.

The fact that the retribution – the reward or the penalty – is often delayed is frequently presumed upon by the foolish, who vainly think they can sow their crop of wild oats and never realize their harvest. Both individuals and nations have long presumed to act upon this hazardous and vain hypothesis; and well indeed would it be if they

would even now hearken to the Apostle's warning: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

The operations of this law are most manifest upon classes and nations – first, because their prominence gives them world-wide publicity; and second, because their judgment must of necessity be in the present life, since beyond the grave the present order of society will have no existence. A glance at the pages of history reveals the fact that all the nations of the past have reaped a bitter harvest, and amid harrowing scenes have breathed their last. They had their rising, their struggling periods, and their flourishing eras; and then "pride and fulness of bread" caused them to rest in fancied security, and to sink in the scale of morals, until their decline was followed by their fall. They reaped what they had sown.

Just now, all the nations of the world are fast approaching the most terrible crises of their national existences. In a great time of unparalleled trouble, which is even now imminent, they are about to reap what they have sown. They have sown to the wind the seeds of selfishness, and now they are about to reap the whirlwind of terror and the destruction of all law and order, and of national and social organization.

### **THE OPERATION OF THE LAW OF RETRIBUTION IN INDIVIDUAL CASES**

The operation of this law in individual cases, though not so prominent, is none the less sure. Every thought harbored, every disposition exercised and cultivated, becomes a component part of individual character; and this character, which is more or less tender in early life, becomes fixed in the course of years. If the cultivation of character has been along the lines of righteousness and truth, according to the light possessed – whether of conscience merely, or of revelation also – the ripened fruit of an established, right-preferring and benevolent character is a blessed harvest in comparison with others, the

reverse. If the cultivation has been along the lines of depravity, self-gratification and degradation, the terrible fruits are a fearful penalty.

Even though such a one be freely forgiven upon repentance and faith in the Redeemer – fully absolved from legal condemnation through Christ, who bore its Divinely pronounced penalty, death – nevertheless, the fruits of his [R5139 : page 369] sowing are manifest in his character. Evil propensities must all be rooted out and a proper character formed at a considerable cost of painful, but valuable experience; for God is just, not only to forgive us our sins, but also to *cleanse us* from all unrighteousness. The eradicating of these evil dispositions, propensities and appetites, deep-rooted and long-cultivated, will cause great disturbances of the soil in which they have grown; and pain as well as joy will attend their removal, and their replacement with the graces of the Spirit.

The Lord, as a Wise Physician, will be as merciful and tender with His patient as the necessities of the case will permit. All will be shown their need of His aid, but no patient will be treated further except with his own consent and co-operation. With the Church this treatment takes place in the present life and is a treatment of the *will* rather than of the body; for although the body will be greatly helped by the treatment, it is not the Great Physician's purpose to *cure* these marred bodies, but to give to this class perfect spirit bodies early in the Millennial Day. In these the consecrated *will* is being transformed and renewed to perfect harmony with the will of God, the mind of Christ. The "overcomers," the true Church, passing through difficulties and cleansing and trials of faith and afflictions now, and being approved of the Lord, will not come into the judgment (trial) of the Millennial Age (I Cor. 11:32); but, with the Redeemer, their Lord, will be Kings and Priests of God, who shall judge the world and recompense to them good or evil, impartially, under the terms of the New Covenant. – I Cor. 6:2.

## JUDGMENT DAY EXPERIENCES HEART SEARCHING

Another feature of retribution upon the world during the Millennial trial will be the publicity which will then be given to the reaping and to the deeds of the past. Our Lord has so intimated, saying, "There is nothing covered that shall not be revealed; neither hid that shall not be known," etc. (Matt. 10:26; Luke 12:2,3.) This also will come about in a natural way, when in that day all that are in their graves shall come forth. Then the murderer and his victim, the debtor and his creditor, the thief and his dupe, the defamer and the defamed, must face each other and the facts, which, with even the secret motives, will be discerned. The terms of their reconciliation to each other and to the Judge will be equitable, and will be known to all.

Past history will have proclaimed to the world the character of many a Nero; but additionally, there will be the necessity of their seeing the former victims of their ignoble cruelty, and facing them in the light of a new and healthy public sentiment, which will manifest crime in all its horrid deformity. Truly such "shall awake to shame and lasting [Heb. *olan*] contempt," even in their own eyes; for as the renewed manhood of the race begins to assert itself, they will the more fully realize the depth of the pit of degradation whence they were digged; and even the generous forgiveness of formerly injured and outraged fellow men will be a great humiliation. It will truly be, as the Scriptures suggest, the heaping of coals of fire on their heads (Prov. 25:21,22; Rom. 12:20), so great will be their shame and confusion. – Jer. 20:11.

It should be borne in mind, too, that the only standard of judgment in public sentiment at that time will be *character*. None of the *false* standards – wealth, noble birth, or aristocracy of power, by which men are often measured now, and under which cloaks the wicked often take shelter – will then avail anything; for under the New Dispensation men will come forth shorn of all their former possessions.



They will have neither wealth nor power; and in the light of that Age, heredity will be nothing whereof to boast.

The same conditions which will thus expose the evils of the past life and thus, in the natural operations of moral law, bring about a measure of retribution to the evil-doers, will also make manifest the good deeds of the righteous, so that even the slightest favors done for others, deeds which at the time blessed the characters of the doers, will then be recognized and appreciated.

### **OPERATION OF RETRIBUTIVE LAW NATURAL**

In this view of the matter we can see how, in a perfectly natural way, a man must reap the harvest of his sowing of wild oats, even though he has been freely forgiven, absolved from guilt and its penalty, death, and legally justified through faith in Christ. He will reap it, not only in the difficulties he will have piled up for himself in the hardening of his own character, making the steps up to perfection more painful and slow, and requiring severer discipline, but also in the just disapproval, or indignation of a righteous public sentiment in that Millennial Day of Judgment.

Such will be the natural and inevitable results of present wrongdoing. One consolation, however, will be the fact that this humiliation, in some measure, at least, will be *shared by all*; "for there is none righteous [none perfect], no, not one" (Rom. 3:10); and all must pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others." It will indeed be a time for melting and mellowing all hearts. Thus the Lord will take away the stony heart and give to all who under the New Covenant shall become *His people* (typified by Israel) a heart of flesh, according to His promise. – Ezek. 36:22-28.

In some instances a portion of the reaping is experienced in the present life; and in some it will be in the life to come, as the Apostle intimates in I Tim. 5:24,25. So also good works are sometimes manifest now, and rightly appreciated and rewarded. But whether now or

hereafter, our Lord's assurance is that even the gift of a cup of cold water to one of His disciples, *because* he is His disciple, shall have its reward (Matt. 10:40-42); so minute will be the Lord's cognizance of character and works, and His rewards therefor; and they will be none the less *His* rewards because accomplished in the natural operation of retributive laws.

A murderer may be one who has little or no knowledge of God, whose hereditary disadvantages may be great and whose environment may be very unfavorable. He may meet with a just recompense for his crime at the hands of his fellow men, and yet in due time come forth from his grave *unto* [the privileges and opportunities of] a resurrection [lifting up – all the way *up*] by judgment [trial, discipline]. If obedient, he may reach the height of perfection and life everlasting, although the sins of his past life may have made mountains of difficulties in his character for him to clamber over during that Judgment Age.

On the other hand, one may be a moral man, who has "tasted the good Word of God, and the powers of the Age to come" and who has been made a partaker of the spirit of holiness through faith in Christ; yet he may permit envy and strife to take possession of his heart; and he may *hate his brother*, though he outwardly violates no law and is esteemed among men. Such a one is a *murderer* at heart (I John 3:15), though restrained from outward violence by respect for the opinions of others or by fear of the consequences. Who will deny that such a one, because of light enjoyed, may have even greater difficulties to overcome in the reformation of his character than the grosser, but ignorant, murderer? To whom much [**R5139 : page 370**] is given in the way of knowledge, opportunity, etc., of him much will be required. (Luke 12:48.) That judgment will be according to knowledge and ability to do right – a just recompense of reward.

## **SEQUENCE THE DIVINE ARRANGEMENT REGARDING RETRIBUTION**

Only the idiotic and the insane are in total darkness. All others have had at least a conscience, and few have been without some hope of reward in following its dictates, though, as St. Paul says, they had no hope and were without God in the world. They were without the only *real* hope – the Gospel. (Eph. 2:12.) Previous to the announcement of the Gospel hope of everlasting life, and its foreshadowing in Israel, the hope of the world in general was only for the present rewards of righteousness. And no other hope was clearly held out, even to Israel, although there were hints and foreshadowings to them of the Gospel hope, as there was also in the promise given in Eden – that the Seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head. These gleams of hope were doubtless treasured up and reasoned upon by the more thoughtful minds; but the masses of men discerned only the simple lesson that honesty, righteousness, was the best present policy.

But when Christ came, He "brought life [everlasting] and immortality [clearly] to light through the Gospel." (2 Tim. 1:10.) Since then, proportionately as men have come directly or indirectly in contact with that Gospel, their responsibility has been increased, whether they accepted or rejected, opposed or ignored it. As it is written, "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." – John 3:19.

The Divine arrangement regarding retribution seems generally to be that of *sequence*, so that under it rewards and punishments follow naturally, as the results of obedience or disobedience to law. Yet in the cases both of rewards and of penalties God sometimes steps beyond this order; as for instance, when He exalts the Church with Christ, their Head, to the Divine nature, Kingdom and glory; and when He brings upon Satan and his followers *swift destruction* at the end of the Millennial Age. His extraordinary methods have also been occasionally manifested in the past; viz., in the destruction of the world

by the flood, in the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, in the confusion of tongues at Babel, and other instances of minor note. But these are special and exceptional exhibitions both of His wrath and of His grace.

A just estimate of the Lord's dealings in the future judgment of the repentant of the world may be approximated by a careful observance of His dealings with His justified and consecrated children now. Though justified, we are not liberated from all the consequences of our past ignorance or waywardness. If in youthful ignorance and waywardness bad habits were contracted which have impaired health and weakened moral and physical powers, we have all the difficulties to struggle against now, though we realize the Divine forgiveness and assistance.

This is our judgment day; and the judgment of the world will proceed upon the same general principles. They will first be brought to a knowledge of the Truth, and will then be judged according to their use or abuse of that knowledge after they receive it, as worthy or unworthy of life. The good and bad actions of their first life, previous to their knowledge of the Truth, will enter into this judgment only in the natural order of the retributive character of moral Law.

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