The Judgements of God

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INTRODUCTION TO THE JUDGEMENTS OF GOD

It is often what we will not face which most needs facing. This deflection carries us into numerous encounters of life. In particular: the dynamics of personal relationships, permitting illness to be diagnosed, analysing social economics, in the fabricating of political solutions, and more.

The judgements of God, (in particular the judgement of God against the totality of deprivation, evil and injustice) are the scourge of healing for man, and the spring of his total reorientation: Primarily this is because it is where we meet God in his unyielding opposition to wickedness, and discover him faithful and true in a world of raging contradiction. Also, but in no secondary sense, it is only in the severity and unflinching action of God’s judgement that we see and know the insistence of his goodness; and the rehabilitation of true love.

From ancient times until the present, the idea of God’s judgements has been mocked. Australians are no exception. With our harsh, angry and often cruel beginnings as a nation, we switch off to the sound of judgement. Knowing this, and wanting to have the approval of our culture, Christians have grown squeamish about a God who judges, and who will judge. Rationalisations have formed, such as: it is ‘Old Testament’ to speak of judgement because the ‘New Testament’ is about a God of love. This diversion ignores the fact that both testaments of the Bible are one whole, that the God and Father of Jesus Christ is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and that judgement is no less an emphasis in the New Testament than in the Old.

It is true that some preachers have violently punished their hearers with a harsh, damning God of judgement. Yet it is doubtful if these preachers actually know the God of judgement. The preaching of
judgement which is divorced from the gospel of grace is a disgraceful caricature, depicting a god other than he whose revelation is recorded in the Bible. This too is a veiled way of hiding from judgement.

Australians are a very religious people. In rejecting the truth of God and denying his justice and judgement we have formed a culture thoroughly preoccupied with judgement. The demand to have justice done is the demand for judgement. Our chief protest comes when the disorder and violence of the world touches our own lives. Then the call for judgement becomes a shriek which may determine to impose judgement unilaterally by whatever means. The cry often has a religious, a mythological, or an ideological basis. For example, politics becomes the new sacred. The nation today has become the criterion of good and evil. Science, in driving back the myths of religion, has created the environment for new myths with their own irrationality and presumed ability to explain everything.* In the consideration of judgement the fact is that religion, stirred by an explosive faith, always produces violence.

Are we ready to face the judgements of God? In our evil belligerence, and a condemning conscience, not one of us can bear to face God’s judgements. This is true of the present, as well as in the final judgement where all is assessed, weighed and sentence given. We will see that it is only in Jesus Christ that we can face the God of judgement. This is the God who showed himself to Abraham, who, upon this knowledge could say, ‘Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?’ (Genesis 18:25).

**GOD’S JUDGEMENT IS CONTEMPORANEOUS**

We mean that while God’s judgements look ahead to a filling up, and a climax in history in ‘that Day’, and while we can look back to see the accounts of God’s judgements in the past as interpreted in Scripture, God’s judgements are not a kind of lunge in and out of certain special nominated events, like a sword unsheathed for blood, but that God’s judgements are always at work simultaneously in the events of history. There are crisis points, build-up events, and periods of upheaval, convulsion, collapse, and liberation which are particular days where judgement comes to fruition in a cataclysmic way.

As King of his creation, and active ruler over all things, the Lord is all the time judging. Not judging in that legalistic, critical way that we associate with judgement. God’s judgement is his command, the outworking of his decree, the earthly realisation of his gracious will. We are speaking of the living God who is ever present to each atom and surge of his creation. It is because God wills to treat us ‘as his own that he judges us. We mean God treats us so seriously that he cannot spare us from his judgement. In judgement we are confronted with God and our existence is weighed, measured and assessed. Therefore we must not confuse God’s justice with that of the impersonal style we are usually accustomed to in the legal process of British law.

God’s judgements are at work in the midst of man’s doings, in spite of his unrighteousness.

‘But the Lord sits enthroned for ever, he has established his throne for judgement; and he judges the world with righteousness, he judges the peoples with equity’ (Psalm 9:7-8).

‘The Lord within her is righteous, he does no wrong; every morning he shows forth his justice, each dawn he does not fail: but the unjust knows no shame’ (Zephaniah 3:5).

‘When thy judgements are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness’ (Isaiah 26:9).

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* That God is ever dynamically present to his creatures and his creation can be seen from the following scriptures. 'My Father is working still', says Jesus, i.e., there has never been a time, nor shall there be a moment when the Father is not serving his creation, caring for it, judging it. redeeming it and bringing it to the goal he has purposed for it since before the Beginning of time. Psalm 10-4 shows the creation always dependent upon the Holy Spirit, while Acts 17:24-29 shows that we all have our lives in God.

† Cf. Psalm 96:13.98:8f.

Therefore we need to emphasise the present judgement of the Father (John 8:50 AV.). This judgement, given by the Father to the Son who is doing what he sees the Father doing, shows us the Father. The greatest fear would be that God should cease to have any concern for him and so cease to exercise judgement toward him, treating him with indifference and unconcern.

Without a sentimental view of God’s judgements, and knowing God’s integrity, David chooses the severity of God’s judgement rather than to be given over to the capricious, self-willed, and arbitrary judgement of men (II Chronicles 21:13).

God’s judgements work in the experience of people—personally, nationally and ecologically—in the following ways:

(1) The judgement of God’s wrath where man is given over to his sin. The decisive passage in Scripture for this is Romans 1:18-32. God’s wrath is no impersonal karma, or mechanical ordering of events. This passage is not speaking of ‘the wrath to come’, but the present experience of it as man lives against the truth of God, and in being given over to his lie and his evil, knows sin as God’s present wrath. Colossians 3:6 also shows God’s wrath as conjoined with the practice and experience of sin.† God’s wrath can be seen in the anguish of man, his addiction to idols, the loss of his own personhood, sexual perversion, societal and family injustice, violence, bloodshed and ruthlessness, often ending in self-destruction. There is a craving to destroy, to break down authority, which prepares us for political messiahs who promise the security we crave.

British journalist Henry Fairlie wrote: ‘The envious person is moved, first and last, by his own lack of self-esteem... We feel cheated by our newspapers and magazines if no one is levelled in the dust in them. We wait in ambush for the novel that fails, for the poet who commits suicide, for the financier who is a crook, for the politician who slips, for the priest who is discovered to be an adulterer. We lie in ambush for them all, so that we may gloat at their misfortunes.’ So we brew our own destruction, but never in independence of God.

(2) Oecological judgement, i.e. the judgement of nature. We are involved in the curse brought upon the ground (Genesis 3:17ff.). Cain experienced alienation from the creation (Genesis 4:11 ff.). With an anger toward God and a vandalistic approach to the creation, man brings his own grief through his greedy use of the world’s resources. Again God is not absent from all of this. It is his creation; the judgement we sow is the judgement God gives. We have been warned by some not to see droughts, floods’, pestilence, and violent storms as indications of God’s judgement. Yet the prophets were not silent in this regard. Israel is promised good seasons in obedience and warned of famine for disobedience (Deuteronomy 28). Drought was never seen as outside of God’s realm of action, anymore than the people of God neglected to give thanks to him for the plentiful seasons.

In Australia we are responsible for a land whose characteristics and climate include drought and flood. In defiance we expand as if this did not apply, or as if it should not apply. God’s judgements apply not only to Israel, but to all the nations. He speaks to us in his severity and in his kindness. ‘Does evil befall a city, unless the Lord has done it?’ (Amos 3:6). ‘I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me,” says the Lord. "And I also withheld the rain from you when there were yet three months to the harvest; I would send rain upon one city, and send no rain upon another city... yet you did not return to me," says the Lord’ (Amos 4:6-8, cf. verses 9-13).

(3) We should expect God’s judgement as a current reality. A civilisation which rejects the truth and refuses God’s crucified Son should expect to collapse. The collapse will be the culmination of
wrath stored up; it will be catastrophic, but as in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, it will be just (cf. Genesis 15:16, 18:20-33). God is at work in public judgement. Rather than the present moral, economic, and social break-up of society shaking our faith, we ought to be more unsettled if life were able to progress in continual rejection of the truth.

**JUDGEMENT IS A MORAL NECESSITY**

1. **It is necessary because of the nature of God.** We have already touched on the reality of God’s kingly rule over the creation, sustaining, upholding, and directing all that he has made.

‘Judgement’ is associated with several other words, some of which may be translated interchangeably. ‘Judgement’, for example, is often translated ‘justice’. To be just is to act according to right, and such action is deemed righteous action. God, being King and Ruler of his creation, expresses his justice in his judgements, which are in accord with his utter faithfulness. This is the way of truth, the practice of love and the demonstration of God’s holiness.

We must not regard God’s wrath in judgement as the opposite of God’s patience in love, as though they were two sides of a coin, or as if God were a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Similarly we must not make a tension between God’s righteousness and his love, as though we have to be saved from a remote, hard Judge by fleeing to the warm, accepting, gracious Father. This will not do at all. There is no duality in God as if his love had to satisfy the demands of his righteousness, or as if the merciful Saviour needed to appease the strict Lord.

‘The gospel leaves no doubt whatsoever that we may surrender ourselves in complete confidence to the gracious love of God. Only when we refuse to do that do we become the guilty victims of a duality in God. We are then confronted with his justice in which he claims the refusing person for himself, and with his wrath by which he accompanies our estrangement. But these are and remain the expressions of holy love.’—Hendrikus Berkhof.

The alternative to love is not judgement or wrath, it is neutrality.

2. **Judgement is necessitated by the conscience of man.** We demand that injustice be rectified. It must take place effectively in history. We will not be at peace with private experiences, or mythological ecstasies. There must be a judgement or life is immoral and there is only the despair of absurdity. Those who form a fair-weather ‘God’—an idol who is either too weak to judge or too nice to confront evil—find that their god blows away in a storm. He collapses in a black hour. People say, ‘I used to believe in God until...’ and they recount some misfortune, a bereavement or a disaster. Others have a god who is all goodness to those who do good, who rewards with success those who do things for him (actually it is for themselves!). But this god cannot cope with failure, and he cannot regenerate the conscience of self-willed men and women.

**God’s Judgements Show History to be a Moral Drama, not a Moral Progress**

Western man, in eschewing the truth of God, also rejects any view that God might have a purpose in history. We have attempted to empty history of any religious meaning, that is to secularise it. History itself now has been transmuted into a value which makes it the judge of good and evil. ‘History will judge,’ it is stated. History is ‘now,’ the meaning in and of itself, giving itself an eternal value, which is really a myth and modern man’s attempt to recapture his origin and to establish himself. Dialectical materialism is one example of a religious interpretation of history, one of its myths being that matter is eternal. However, man has attempted to seize history in order to make it serve his myth of human progress. Man also seizes power to fulfil his myth of utopias. It often carries the cry of social justice for
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The poor, using revolution to reach its ends. It imposes its ideology on its subjects, lives by suppression, and has much to hide.

History of itself cannot tell us what is progress and what is not. It cannot tell us why it all began, or what its purpose is. No norm of interpretation is given in history, and our subjective interpretation of history is likely to be by the gauge of our success, prosperity, or the defeats and dilemmas of our enemies.

History cannot be moralistically summarised by charts. But there are those events within the order of creation and the historical process through which men can come to believe that history is not autonomous, but the direct expression of God’s purposes.

The moral drama of history has to do with God’s eternal purpose for the creation which is the unifying of all things in Christ, the gathering together of his family, and the regeneration of all things. This will come through the judgement of the cross. The moral drama is the outworking of God’s decree in and through man’s evil and sickness, enabling his purpose to be fulfilled through his judgements, while annulling evil and redeeming man.

Using the analogy of different methods of farming for different seeds and variable soils, Isaiah, in chapter 28, verses 23-29, shows how God tills man and shapes history. The point of the analogy is that the methods used for one form of grain would be ruinous to another (verse 27), and even rougher methods may need to be applied with moderation.

Note the following factors:

(a) God proceeds in history but his procedure varies.
(b) Judgement is not always immediate (eg. as with the Canaanites, Egypt in Moses’ day, Israel and Judah, etc). However, we are not to think God is asleep.
(c) Some forms of evil bring swifter forms of judgement than others.
(d) God is not gripped by passion like man. else he would make a clean sweep of all the earth. Rather, he is longsuffering, patient, not wishing that any perish.

(e) God does not move like a man in a hurry, using short-cuts, but he is always judging at the right time.
(f) The judgements of God adjust to people, time and events, with the great end in view—the harvest at the end of the age.
(g) We could also add here that the judgements in history are often ironic. For example, what to us are pleasant vices can become instruments which scourge us. What is failure can became the means of strength and advance, while our success can create conditions which smother these.

The goal of history is the final judgement. It is only finally at the cross of Christ that we learn to interpret the irony of history, and it is only in the judgement of the cross that the silting up of all previous judgements are dissolved. Nothing can forestall the judgement of the cross. All heaven and earth are gathered at the judgement seat of Christ, where God judges the world.

Judgement begins at the Household of God

It is too easy to criticise the church and expose the shame of the body of Christ before the gaze of the world. Likewise to judge the church can be a deceitful way of self-justification, of seeking the praise of those who have rejected God’s people, and as a means to win the admiration of the world.

To the religious Jew, with the covenant promises, the law, and the privileges of being God’s ancient people, it was the pagans, the immoral, and those without the pale whom they believed would receive the brunt of God’s judgement. Yet Paul could quote to them from their own scriptures: ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you’ (Romans 2:24).

There is a strong warning against presumption (eg. Amos 5:18-20). And the church is called upon to show the fruit of love and justice which flow from true faith.

* I owe the substance of this to P.T. Forsyth in his The Justification of God.

We are told in I Peter 4:17 and James 4:12 that judgement begins with God’s people. These are his beloved people, and it is because they stand in covenant relationship with God that he judges them. ‘You only have I known of all the families of the earth,’ says the Lord to Israel; ‘therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities’ (Amos 3:2).

The people whom God has called, redeemed and made his own through his forgiveness are to live as a graced people who freely obey the Word of their Lord. In his holy love, God warns people by his spokesmen of the judgements entailed in, and following disobedience. In the Old Testament the gift of the sacrifices from ‘God was the means of God keeping his covenant people up to obedience. Disobedience flows from deliberate rejection of the word of God’s grace, with man now using and controlling the word for his own ends. injustice, presumption, and wickedness flow from this, and the damming up of guilt increase the trespass (Romans 7:5,9, 13).

The judgement then becomes a famine of the word (Amos 8:11) or, ‘My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge...’ (Hosea 4:6). And Jesus says, ‘Woe to you, lawyers! for you have taken away the key of knowledge’ (Luke 11:52).

The church likewise fights against grace, even while confessing to believe in it. Paul warns of the judgements incurred in turning to another gospel (Galatians 1:9, 3:1Off.). Yet we void the Word of God with our reductionism, and so make the gospel an anti-revelation. We reduce the gospel to ‘a simple gospel’, i.e. a gospel which is ‘relevant to modern man’. For example, the gospel is turned into a methodology, a technique where we achieve our results, where we in fact turn it into modern propaganda and play up to the praise of men promising success, prosperity and a life without judgement, now or in the future.

‘There is a reduction of the revealed to the cultural, a reduction of the cultural to the political, and a reduction of the two dimensions to one horizontal dimension, etc.’--Ellul.

The judgement, which follows is a loss of truth and the seeming silence of God (Isaiah 45:15f., 30:10). There is no word from the Lord, but the prophets still have their dreams and heal the wound of God’s people lightly (Jeremiah 8:11, 23:16ff.). The people of God are bound by the captivity of the culture, bemused and addicted to magic, but crushed with the fears and pain of futility and the void of lies (Isaiah 28: 1-28).

The sufferings experienced by the people of God are not nameless evils. At Corinth the church was imposing the powerful culture of its Greek surroundings upon the gospel, with resultant fighting and immorality in the church; and Paul, rebuking their disunity at the Lord’s Supper, says, ‘For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgement upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died’ (I Corinthians 11:29f.).

This crisis comes upon a man when he encounters the righteousness of God, but in which the grace of God is all the time present and operative. In the Bible it is frequently called God’s chastisement. Hence Paul adds to his words regarding judgement to the Corinthian church: ‘But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened so that we may not be condemned along with the world’ (I Corinthians 11:32). God’s judgements are signs of the Father’s love, as shown in Hebrews 12:6.*

**ALL JUDGEMENT IS SUMMED UP AND EXECUTED IN THE CROSS**

The Bible leaves us in no doubt as to the righteousness of God and the necessity of judgement. The righteousness of God is the character and actional expression of God’s reign in love over the entire creation. The judgements of God in history are all anticipatory of the final judgement, the ultimate dooming of evil in time. This judgement, while renewing the believer personally, has ‘to be wider than his own personal experience. It must establish God’s righteous reign

against evil by defeating and defusing the whole of evil. This must be done in the face of everything. It must be historic, cosmic, and final.

At the personal level we will only be satisfied, liberated, regenerated in our consciences, and brought to the opening of faith, repentance and glad obedience, when we know judgement has been done and is finished. Only then, when we have seen God’s judgement, will all of our shadows or dark clouds over God vanish.

Still on the personal level, judgement means that we are called to give account for our lives. Again it can only be God who gives the ultimate verdict, and only God’s judgement can satisfy our conscience, which also ultimately demands judgement. Then too we give different accounts of ourselves than God does, and there is no higher court of appeal than his judgement.

(1) Messiah’s coming is for salvation through judgement. Isaiah 42:1-4 shows God’s chosen servant as the one who will meekly, but nonetheless certainly, establish justice in the earth. This will be according to righteousness and truth, and it must be understood that this can only be through judgement. Isaiah 9:1-7 and 11:1-10 tell of the fairness of the judgement, yet it will be a judgement which will break and destroy the enemy. This will be God’s doing—not man’s achievement or arranging, but theocentric victory.

John the Baptist, in accord with Isaiah 40:1ff., sees Messiah’s coming as the coming of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 3:2), and warns of the wrath to come (Luke 3:7, Matthew 3:10ff.), yet interprets it as ‘And all flesh shall see the salvation of God’ (Luke 3:5). John’s baptism is a sign of penitent expectation of the Judge. Into this vocation Jesus is baptised and anointed, he identifies with the whole human race in its sinfulness, and is empowered by the Spirit to destroy sin.

(2) Salvation is through judgement. A clear understanding of God’s judgement is what caused the people of God in the Old Testament to shout for joy, because they knew it was the hour of liberation. Unlike our dualist views of God which want us to somehow flee from his wrath to his mercy, the biblical revelation shows that it is only in the judgement of our sin, in our being judged, that we can be freed of the evil and freed to face God. This means the person who has come from the judgement of God, having passed through it, is not the same person who came to it.

(3) The cross is the bar where the world is judged. John 12:31f. has Jesus speaking of his death and saying, ‘Now is the judgement of this world, now is the ruler of this world cast out’. Paul sees the death of Christ as cosmic when he says that through the cross all things have been reconciled to God (Colossians 1:20). But the reconciliation comes only through the judgement of atonement (II Corinthians 5:19, 21, Romans 3:21-26, cf. I John 4:10, Psalm 65:8).

(4) The world is judged by bearing the world’s sins into judgement. As the Lamb of God, Jesus bears the sins of the world (John 1:29). In the cross all injustice is accumulated (Matthew 21:33-42). At Calvary we also see the greatest injustice of all time. Man--man personally, man corporately--is gathered in the whole of the Adamic humanity to reject, condemn and destroy the only Son who has shown us the Father and brought us face to face with the truth of God and of ourselves (Acts 2:36, I John 2:2).

In bearing our sin Jesus, the true man, who willingly does his Father’s will, takes the working wrath of God, the curse, the torment, the dread, the aloneness, into the fires of judgement (I Peter 2:24, Colossians 3:13, II Corinthians 5:21). It is God’s personal judgement, yet the God who personally relates to the whole creation and all of his creatures enters the judgement himself, by the Spirit, in his only Son.

Our evil exhausts itself in Christ. Our injustice and self-justification is defeated. The hypocrisy and banality of the church is borne up into the cross to be unveiled, exposed, and condemned. Romans 8:1-4 shows that we are freed from condemnation by the condemnation of sin in the action of Christ.

All are gathered in Christ to his passion. Christ bears the evil of those who have wronged or hurt us. He takes the evil which has been inflicted upon us by others. He takes our own guilt and shame, as well as the pain we have incurred by holding onto the hurts of others.
This is the crisis of judgement. The crisis of the cross not only confronts us with our evil, it confronts us with its doom. It not only confronts us with ourselves, but with God. Now we can face what we would not face. It is this: not appeals, decisions, or religious education, but the cross works a crisis of judgement in us by the Spirit, bringing a new conscience, free of the slag of guilt, and fresh to obey God.

Judgement by the Judge who was Judged

Future judgement must be understood in the light of the cross and from the perspective of him who bore the judgement of the cross. Hebrews 9:26-28 sees future judgement in this context. ‘But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgement, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.’

The One who bore the judgement once for all also reigns as the glorified Son, and as Lord over all. Thus he is judging the nations and by his Lordship; by his judging, is bringing persons and peoples into regeneration by the Word of the gospel. This makes the Word of the gospel a powerful word of judgement, working death in those who reject it, while effecting life in those who obey it. This is the Word of the cross, the power of God, the preaching of righteousness, the bringing of the truth, and all by the man, the Judge who was judged for us. Future judgement will be by this man. All will come before the judgement seat of Christ. The significant thing of judgement being by this man is that it will come through the one who has endured the cross and whose Father was in all that the Son did. The judge of the world is its Saviour. We need have no perverted or legalistic dread of this judge, while we can be certain that the judgement exercised will be righteous and fair.

The judgement of the world having taken place in the midst of history must have its ultimate fulfilment by running into the last judgement. Here those who have been judged and received the judgement of acquittal will be vindicated (Galatians 5:5, II Timothy 4:8). At the last all we have not done in love, or have done in unrighteousness, will be lost, for it will have no part in the new world (I Corinthians 3:15). All that is of the truth, all that flows from love and the practice of righteousness, will have accumulated and contributed to a full entrance into the new world.

The disobedient and faithless will also face the judgement seat of Christ, but to receive their just condemnation. In these terms we are warned about future judgement (Acts 24:25). The judgement will be the judgement we have made of the gospel. It will be on the grounds of our attitude to Christ (II Thessalonians 1:8-10, cf. Matthew 25:46, Revelation 20:11-15). The self-giving love we see on the cross is the most damning judgement imaginable on the self-seeking life. It is the reflex of salvation (John 12:47ff., 8:50). It is a process which is going on now (John 3:19). Men and nations daily register their own judgement. It is something like writing two copies of our life at once, one though a carbon copy of time and death which reaches into and culminates in eternity. History is at bottom this action. Here the sin of rejection, and all sin, is brought to a head, ending in the doom of hell.

Those who reject the truth will concur that their sentence is just (Romans 2:15f., Revelation 4:5f.). This will be the second death, knowing the wrath of the Lamb, the outer darkness and the place where men gnash their teeth. It does not mean annihilation, and while the torment may not be eternal, the state and the fire are. This


Philippians 3:8-11, II Peter 1:10f., II John 8, Matthew 25:31-40, 46 and numerous places speak of rewards and losses,’ but these must be also understood in the light of Christ’s Advent and our relationship to him.
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hell must be understood only in the light of the gospel so that those who live will not lament, or weep as though God had failed. All will agree, and all will acknowledge that ‘God is good’, giving thanks to him for his judgements, overwhelmed by the full working out of the judgement of the cross.

Finally II Peter 3:10-13 says that the whole creation will be renewed through the fires of judgement. This will be outworking of the cosmic judgement of the cross, creation freed from the curse (Romans 8:21), the pollution and ecological dislocation regenerated, and the coming of a new heaven and a new earth.*

CONCLUSION

We began by saying that we are reluctant to face what we need to face. Judgement, God’s fierce judgement, is not wanted by fearful and guilty men. The thought of accountability makes us angry. We have refashioned God and have been crippled. But God has faced us in his judgement. We have not been able to snatch ourselves out of his grasp. As we look and see, so we can look, and see, and live.