

BY WILLIAM G. JOHANSSON *"In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:30, 31).*

The apostle Paul is standing on the rocky hill opposite the Acropolis in Athens. Among the crowd gathered to hear what he has to say are philosophers and passersby eager to catch any bit of new, titillating information. Paul begins to talk about the religious practices he has observed in the city and points them to the one true God, the maker of heaven and earth, the source of life for all. Then he brings the address to a climax with the warning: *judgment day is coming!*

It is a message that rings throughout the Bible. God, the moral arbiter of the universe, will call men and women to account. None can escape; none can hide. People may try to deny it, try to block it from their consciousness, but the fact remains: *judgment day is coming!* "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). "For with fire and with his sword the Lord will execute judgment upon all men, and many will be those slain by the Lord" (Isa. 66:16). Likewise Jesus, who spoke so much about the Father's love, also taught that judgment day was coming: "But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken" (Matt. 12:36).

In our present fallen world, injustice abounds. Very often the poor do not receive their dues while those who can afford high-priced lawyers go free. We live in an age when iniquity abounds, when man's inhumanity against his fellow man knows no limits, when evil seemingly goes unchecked, when "truth [is] forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne."^{*}

But the Lord tells us as He tells all humankind: *judgment day is coming!* Evil will not go on and on forever. Justice will not continue to be denied or perverted. God will take matters in hand; He will call all humankind to account.

Standing Firm

After the Holocaust, many Jews abandoned faith in God. In the face of what seemed the divine silence, they could no longer believe. The problem is much older, however. It surfaces in several places in Scripture, notably in Psalm 73. Here the psalmist candidly acknowledges his struggles as he sees how those who reject God seem to prosper. "As for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold," he confesses. "For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (verses 2, 3).

People who give no thought to God seem to enjoy a good life—healthy, carefree, wealthy, proud, violent, scoffers, malicious, arrogant (verses 4-12). They say: "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?" (verse 11).

It was a heavy burden for the psalmist to understand, and it is a heavy burden for us also. But the answer, for him and for us, comes in these words: "till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny" (verse 17).

For the psalmist, the sanctuary assured him that God was alive and well. God was still on the throne, and in His own time and way He would call a halt to the reign of sin and evil. God would make everything right.

For us, the heavenly sanctuary where Jesus ministers as our great high priest gives the same assurance. The world will not go on forever. The crimes that permeate modern society, the base acts of men and women one day must come under the scrutiny of the Lord of the universe. *Judgment day is coming!*

In many Christian churches, the doctrine of the judgment has all but disappeared. Even though worshippers may mouth the words of the ancient creed—"He [Christ] comes to judge the quick and the dead"—the idea no longer has meaning in their experience. Seventh-day Adventists, however, retain this biblical truth as a vital component of our theology. We see our message pictured in the three angels of Revelation, who go to all the world with the proclamation: "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water" (Rev. 14:7).

Note the correspondence with Paul's address on Mars Hill. He challenged his skeptical audience to repent; our message calls everyone to "fear God and give him glory." Paul spoke of God's setting "a day when he will judge the world with justice"; we preach: "the hour of his judgment *has* come."

Changed by Grace

Finally, Paul stated that God will judge the world by the Man whom He appointed, the One whom He raised from the dead—Jesus Christ. The message Adventists are to tell the world centers in Jesus. It is "the eternal gospel," the good news of the God-man who wrought our salvation and who is soon to come again. He is the one who made "the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water" (Rev. 14:7), because "through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (John 1:3).

In the judgment, the crucial issue involves our relationship to Jesus. We cannot save ourselves, no matter how hard we try. When our name comes up in the heavenly courts with the unerring record of our life laid bare—all that we have done and failed to do, all our words, all our innermost thoughts—one question will take precedence over all others: What have we done with God's Son? "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:17, 18).

The heavenly record of our lives, while it alone cannot provide hope, nonetheless is important because it shows the *direction* of our lives. We are weak and erring; we try, but we fall and fall again. With all the stops and starts, however, the grace of Christ is transforming us. The change occurs silently, daily as God's image is being renewed in us. As we walk with Jesus, giving ourselves to Him each day, feeding on His Word and seeking to live for His glory, we become like Him. As a husband and wife who deeply love each other begin to resemble each other in habits and even appearance, so people who love Jesus take on His likeness.

"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18).

Some Seventh-day Adventists are afraid of the judgment. They live in doubt and apprehension that they will not be found good enough to be admitted to heaven at last.

Dear reader, are you among these fearful ones? Let me give you a straight answer from the Bible: You are not good enough. You will never make it on your own.

Questions for Reflection and Sharing

1. Of the many injustices in the world today, which are most in need of being rectified? List at least five.
2. What keeps you hopeful and optimistic despite the evil, violence, and corruption so evident in the world?
3. In what ways should the church be involved in promoting justice in the world as we await Christ's return?

But Jesus is good enough. If you have taken Him as your Savior and Lord, He stands in your place. The Father sees only His Son's perfect righteousness when He looks at you, not the spotty record of your life.

Could it really be true? Trust God's Word, which assures us:

"Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the

throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Heb. 4:14-16).

Ellen White's final message, written in 1914, was addressed to a person who was troubled by doubts and fears regarding their acceptance by Jesus. She wrote:

"It is your privilege to trust in the love of Jesus for salvation, in the fullest, surest, noblest manner; to say, He loves me, He receives me; I will trust Him, for He gave His life for me" (*Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 517).

What comfort! What certainty! God's throne in heaven is a throne of grace! Grace is our living hope; grace is our salvation.

This is good news indeed. *Judgment day is coming!* Praise God!

* From James Russell Lowell, "The Present Crisis," 1844.