The image is a composite. On the left, a muscular man is shown from the back, his hands tied behind his back. In the center, a wooden gavel is visible. On the right, a hand is shown holding a needle. The title 'THE JUDGE JUDGED in Our Place' is written in a red, serif font on the right side.

# THE JUDGE JUDGED in Our Place

by Martin M. Davis

**H**e hung on a cruel, rough Roman cross, his hands and feet pierced with heavy spikes. His open wounds burned as stinging salty sweat poured into the raw gashes across his back. Only minutes before he had been brutalized at the hands of a garrison of soldiers who stripped him naked, beat him without mercy and mocked him with a crown of thorns. As

he hung on the cross, his lips parched with thirst, the leering onlookers jeered him, mocking him to free himself from his horrible impalement. So obscene was his mistreatment that even the heavens revolted and the earth shuddered in revulsion (Matthew 27:45,51).

As his blood oozed from his wounds, flowing downward toward the battle-hardened soldiers casting lots for his garments, he looked upon the taunting crowd. Yet his heart was not filled with hatred, nor righteous anger, nor thirst for revenge. Neither was he moved to avenge himself and execute terrible wrath upon those who had brutalized him. Rather, he looked upon his cruel tormentors with incomprehensible care, compassion and love. While he could have called down heavenly legions to avenge him, instead, with unfathomable love for humanity, he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

No other moment in Jesus' ministry—in fact, no other moment in history—so clearly portrays the depth of God's unfailing love for humanity, for in Jesus' passionate prayer of forgiveness, we see not only the loving heart of the Son, but also the loving heart of the Father.

### Jesus Reveals the Father

To appreciate the depth of God's love for the world, we must understand that in the loving, saving acts of the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, we discover the loving, saving acts of the Father. The early Church took great pains to succinctly and precisely articulate the unassailable biblical fact that in the acts of Jesus we see the acts of God. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they carefully and prayerfully contemplated the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ, and collectively realized that the incarnate Son is one in being and identity with the Father. The Church Fathers enshrined their insights into the Nicene Creed, wherein they asserted that Jesus

Christ is not only "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God," but also of *the same being* as the Father.

Jesus himself portrayed in simple terms his essential relationship with the Father: He said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30) and "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). As John wrote, the Word of God who became flesh, Jesus Christ, has made the Father known (John 1:14, 18). Moreover, the apostle Paul asserts the oneness of Jesus and God; he writes, "In Christ, all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9), while the writer of Hebrews assures us that the incarnate Son is the "exact representation" of God's being (Heb 1:3). In short, the scriptural teaching enshrined in the historic creeds of the Christian faith assures us that, while the Son is *distinct* in personhood from the Father, in the forgiving acts of Jesus we see deeply into the loving heart of the Father.

### The Friend of Sinners

Jesus' prayer for forgiveness springs from the compassionate heart that, even now, continually goes out to sinners (Hebrews 7:25). To be sure, the religious elite impugned Jesus because they knew that he was, indeed, the *friend* of sinners (Luke 7:34). Jesus constantly aroused the ire of religious leaders because he frequently sat at table fellowship with unsavory characters like tax collectors and others who failed to adhere to the burdensome rules and regulations heaped upon them by the religious authorities (Matthew 9:10-12). Moreover, while at a table with a prominent Pharisee, Jesus allowed a woman of ill repute to

wash his feet with her hair (Luke 7:36ff). When he was alone and thirsty, he defied tradition by stopping at a well to converse with a woman of mixed race, a Samaritan whom most Jews would have regarded as worse than a dog, and even more so because she had been married five times and was presently living with yet another man (John 4:4ff).

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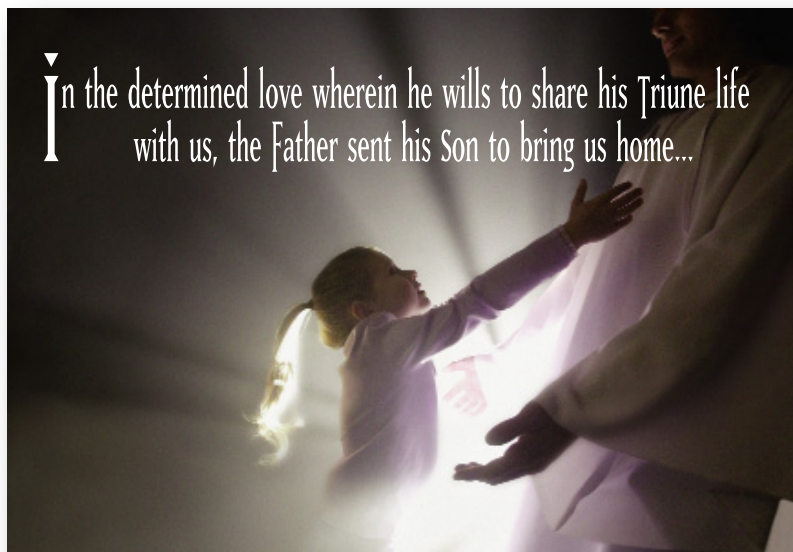
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woman caught in adultery before Jesus for judgment. Yet not only did he refuse to stone her as the law required, but also he refused to condemn her. Instead, he told her to leave her life of sin (John 8:11). Yet, what would have happened had that same woman been brought before Jesus the next day, caught yet again in the act of adul-

tery? The answer is not too difficult. Jesus told his followers that if anyone sinned against them, they were to forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven times (Matthew 18:21-22). Dare we think that Jesus offers any less forgiveness than he commands his disciples to render? Dare we think that the Father, whose heart is as equally compassionate as that of the Son, will do any less?

Often, however, we are unsure of the Father's intentions towards us, because we have failed to allow the Son to reveal the Father. Despite the apostle John's assertion that the Son has made the Father known (John 1:18), much "Christian" preaching and teaching splits apart the unity of God by pitting the merciful, compassionate Son against the bloodthirsty, wrathful Father, whose apparent sole delight is to dangle sinners over the mouth of hell, even in the face of Jesus' pleading on our behalf.

We have projected a mythological deity into the heavens, borne of our own repressed intolerance and judgmentalism, and painted a dark portrait of an inscrutable God much different from the loving,



In the determined love wherein he wills to share his Triune life with us, the Father sent his Son to bring us home...

heart of God and call his wayward children home. Moreover, our loving Father turned *all judgment* and authority over to Jesus himself. According to both scriptural as well as creedal teaching, none other than Jesus Christ, the friend of sinners who freely offered himself for the sins of the world, will return to judge the living and the

dead. As incredible as it may seem, the very one who hung on the cross and prayed, "Father forgive them," is the one who will judge us at the end of our lives, for Jesus tells us that all judgment has been given to him (John 5:22, 3:35; Matthew 28:18).

To understand that our Judge is the one who poured out his blood for the sins of all humanity should profoundly move us at the deepest levels of our souls, freeing us from the fear, dread and anxiety that too often have been heaped wrongfully upon Christians in the name of Christ. None other than our loving, compassionate Savior is our Judge. There is no God hidden behind the back of Jesus before whom we, in our guilty consciences, must shake with dread and terror. When Jesus tells us that he who has seen him has seen the Father, he leaves no room for fear and dread, for the hearts of the Father and Son are one.

### Jesus Our Judge

Because the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are determined to share their Triune life with us, God sent his Son into the world to reveal the

patient, forgiving Father described by Jesus (Luke 15:11-32). This wrong-headed view of the Father as vengeful Judge is contrary to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Jesus came to do the works of the Father (John 5:19-20); he came to show us that his own compassionate heart and the heart of the Father beat as one in loving care for all humanity (*cf.*, John 3:16; 17:11). God's love for humanity is apparent in his desire, even before the creation of the world, to include us in the fellowship of love, joy and bliss that characterize the Triune life of God (Ephesians 1:4-5).

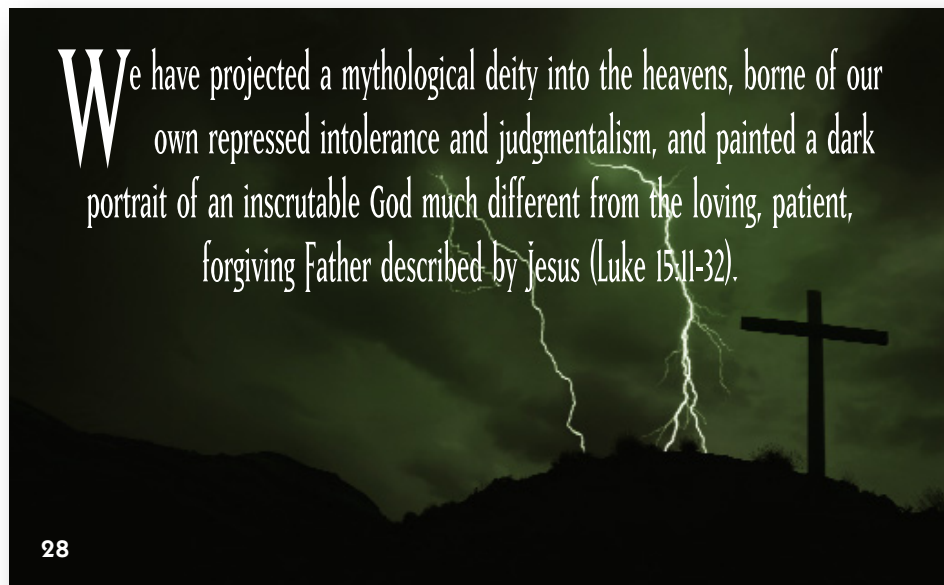
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### The Judge Judged in Our Place

Moreover, at the Cross God not only judges our sins; he takes

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While we must take sin seriously, we must take grace even more seriously. And that we have failed to do: We have made Adam greater than Jesus. We have been unwilling to take seriously the biblical truth that Jesus, the Lamb of God, has taken away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

upon himself the verdict and judgment that should have been ours. To borrow Karl Barth's phrase, "He is the Judge judged in our place." Jesus himself has stood in our place and made our just punishment his own. In short, Jesus Christ has taken away the sin of the world. Thus when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ, we no longer stand before him as condemned sinners. He has borne our judgment upon the Cross and has taken our sin upon himself (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Yet the fact that we no longer occupy the place of sinners in the



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sight of God does not minimize the seriousness of sin. To the contrary, the cross is proof that God is no doddering grandfather who merely winks at sin. To be sure, the height and breadth of the bloody Cross itself is the measure of our sin. So entrenched, so pervasive and so deep is our sin that we could never free ourselves from its bondage. Therefore, God does much more than merely mete out just punishment for sin, for he is not a petulant parent who insists upon punishing his children.

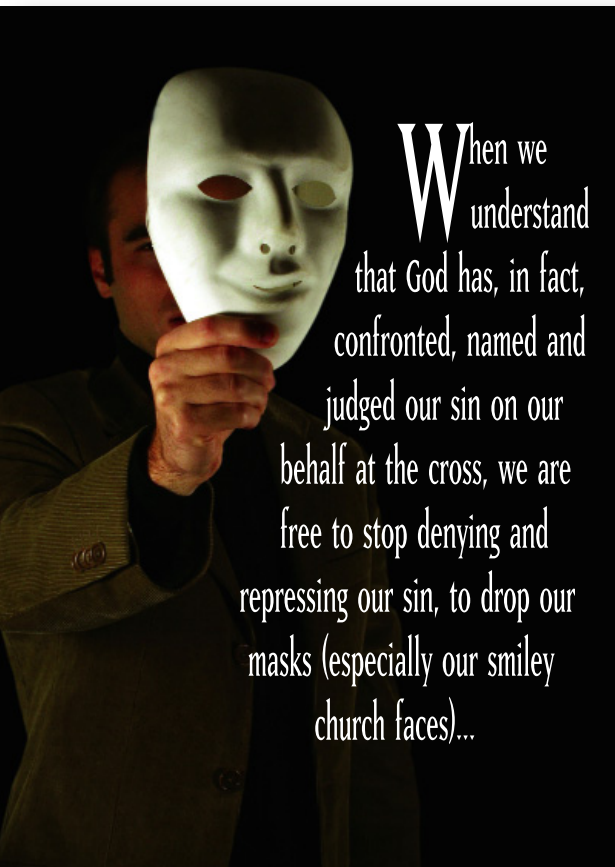
In his unbounded love for humanity, the Word of God takes on human flesh at Bethlehem (John 1:14) and, on behalf of all, lives the life of perfect faith and obedience that you and I have failed to live. He is the new Adam, and just as all die in the

old Adam, all are made alive in him (Romans 5:12-20). In Christ, God has reconciled the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). We may rest in the assurance that, even as great as is the depth of our sin, so much greater is the depth of the riches of God's grace that is poured out on us in the life of Christ.

### Free to Forgive

Thus, while we must take sin seriously, we must take grace even more seriously. And that we have failed to do: We have made Adam greater than Jesus. We have been unwilling to take seriously the biblical truth that Jesus, the Lamb of God, has taken away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

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PHOTO BY MARC GARRIDO / IPIUG

What more sane response could there be to the salvation that is already ours than a humble willingness to obey our Lord, not out of fear of punishment nor dread of awful judgment, but from a heart filled with wonder and gratitude at the immeasurable self-giving of God for all humanity.

other requirements for entrance through the gates of heaven. Like the laborers in the field (Matthew 20:1-16), we are offended by the sheer gratuitousness of grace.

Apparently many think God's gift of salvation should be offered only to those who conform and comply to the rules, however they may be variously defined. Thus, we have burdened ourselves and our fellows with ethical prescriptions, rules and regulations designed to set us apart and mark us as the chosen.

It is, therefore, precisely because we do not realize we no longer occupy the place of sinners in the sight of God that we expend so much energy trying to improve our standing before our heavenly Father. Our failure to realize we are forgiven compels us to perform to gain God's approval and is at the root of the "works" mentality of legalism that drives not only many individuals, but whole churches and denominations.

Failing to realize we no longer stand before God as sinners, we are unable to enjoy the peace that transcends

all understanding (Philippians 4:7), choosing instead to pursue the frenetic path of performance in hopes of pleasing God.

Yet, paradoxically, as soon as we accept God's forgiveness and realize we no longer stand before God as sinners, we are free to accept ourselves as the sinners we are. When we understand that God has, in fact, confronted, named and judged our sin on our behalf at the Cross, we are free to stop denying and repressing our sin, to drop our masks (especially our smiley church faces) and to walk in the immeasurable freedom of the forgiveness provided us nearly two thousand years ago. When we fathom the depth of God's love and acceptance for us, we are free to accept ourselves as we are.

When we realize that we no longer stand as sinners in God's sight, we are free to step down from the judgment seat that belongs only to God and to accept others as the sinners they are.

Because we fail to see that we no longer occupy the place of sinners, we too readily judge those whose values and lifestyles fail to meet with our approval.

### Our Response

To be sure, however, God's gracious condescension to become sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21) demands a response on our part. We are summoned to a life of faith in Jesus Christ. We respond to God's immeasurable graciousness on our behalf, when in humble gratitude we place our faith in our Savior, bow to his Lordship, and live according to his commandment of love. Our obedience, however, is never a condition for our



forgiveness; our obedience is the consequence of our forgiveness. In short, we do not obey to be saved; we obey because we are saved! What more sane response could there be to the salvation that is already ours than a humble willingness to obey our Lord, not out of fear of punishment nor dread of awful judgment, but from a heart filled with wonder and gratitude at the immeasurable self-giving of God for all humanity.

At the Cross we see God's righteous "No" to sin and God's gracious "Yes" to us, for real judgment is rendered at the Cross, and real pardon is rendered to us.

In his unfailing love for humanity, God has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. In the determined love wherein he wills to share his Triune life with us, the Father sent his Son to bring us home in the Spirit.

In the words of the Apostle Paul, "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:31-32). □

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