



World History and World Judgment

How often we are tormented by the thought of all the injustice that occurs in history. How often it is the heaviest battalions that win and not justice. How can one explain the fact that such a diabolical system as Bolshevism is apparently able to maintain itself and is not flung into the abyss by a higher hand? How can we allow this to happen? Again and again the anxious question obtrudes itself. Is the history of the world, as Schiller said, really the judgment of the world? Or is it not, as Theodor Lessing put it, that which gives meaning to the meaningless? But if there are no divine judgments in history, can there be any God at all?

Now, the fact is—and the experience of the men of the Bible confirms it—that the judgments of God simply cannot be established objectively. An example will illustrate this. The song about the shattered armies of Napoleon in Russia declares: “With man and horse and caisson the Lord of hosts did smite them.” Is this really a clear case of a judgment of God upon Napoleon? Perhaps a Frenchman might fairly argue that it was just the other way round, that Europe and not Napoleon was the power smitten by God, since it was surely Europe that was in this way deprived

11

of its Napoleonic principle of order and its benefits. And in this judgment was not Napoleon a mere executor of the judgment? Not only is the character of great figures ambiguous in world history; the role assigned to them by divine governance is obviously equivocal.

Then too, when it comes to the unusual events, distresses, and disasters in our personal life, our diagnosis that these are “judgments of God” is always running into an ultimate limit which makes it questionable: Must the suffering I am subjected to when I have an incurable cancer necessarily be attributed to a previously committed sin and therefore be interpreted as a judgment of God? May it not also be possible to explain it on the basis of its purpose, namely, God’s educative purpose, and would not these two interpretations of this suffering cancel each other out?

These two interpretations of suffering clash dramatically in Jesus’ conversation with his disciples in the story of the man born blind (John 9, especially vss. 1-3). The disciples proceeded from what was to them the self-evident assumption that back of this plight of congenital blindness there must be a sin, that either this man or his parents must have sinned. Jesus rejected this explanation of the disciples and apparently turned it into its opposite. He said that this poor man’s blindness served the purpose “that the works of God might be made manifest in him.” Accordingly, when afflictions and catastrophes come into our lives, we dare not be content merely to ask, “Why should this happen to me?” but rather, “To what end, for what purpose has this burden been sent to me?”

In any case, it is obviously not a simple matter of establishing a clear connection between suffering and sin.

The fact that we cannot establish a connection between sin and punishment, at least in many cases, that again and again we are thrown back to the question, “Why is God silent, why is he so passive, when we should expect that he would come down in a storm of judgment and set a clear example?”—all this constitutes the severest kind of test of faith precisely for devout people.

But then we must remember that it is by no means true that

when God seems to be silent and passive nothing is happening. The judgment itself may in fact be taking place in his silence and passivity; indeed, his silence and passivity may be the judgment. In the language of faith this means that God withdraws his arm and leaves men to themselves, abandons them to the consequences of their actions and thus delivers them up to their own judgment. The very moments in which the silence of God causes the godless person to feel safe and to mock at such a thing as divine judgment, because he equates the dreadful act of divine permission with the nonexistence of God, can be the very moments when the man of faith sees the judgment of God bearing down upon the world like an oppressive nightmare, so much so that he would actually feel an outburst of an open storm of wrath to be a relief from the weird and sinister oppression of this silent judgment.

We see, therefore, that even the seeming silence of God, his apparent failure to wreak judgment upon the world, cannot be explained by saying that we men lack the antennae to perceive these relationships, or that the impression that God is silent is merely a false acoustical impression produced by our unhearing ears and hardened hearts; as if, in other words, the silence of the Judge were due to the insensitivity of our hearts.

No, the silence of the Judge is an objective thing. It is bound up with the real nature of divine judgment. Even the angels who stand about the throne of God can testify that God's silence is real; so far is it from being merely a figment of man's deluded and hardened heart. God really can be silent. He by no means judges merely—or better, he hardly ever judges, by smiting the transgressor with a stroke of lightning or some other disaster; on the contrary he judges him by letting him go in silence. Thus he allowed the people who built the tower of Babel to wreck themselves on their own godlessness. By doing what seemed to be nothing, he allowed the dispersion to fall upon them in their godlessness. So his silence, far from being passivity, was actually extreme activity. What he allowed to happen there was the equivalent of his coming down and confusing their language. God

was at work in their self-confusion merely by reason of his standing aside and looking on. So he also "gave up" the heathen to their own ungodliness (Rom. 1:18 ff.).

This giving up and abandonment (*paredoken*) is the way of silent judgment, though at first sight one might think that here was an instance in which the law of retribution was apparent to everybody.

We therefore begin to understand why it is that it is so difficult to establish a connection between guilt and retribution in history. And the truth is that one must know the Judge in order to understand his judgments. So long as we do not face this Judge as a personal Thou who reveals himself as our Father in Jesus Christ, we shall be hopelessly at the mercy of this question of how the world order functions. And our situation is actually "hopeless" in the strict sense, not only because the tormenting question "Why?" never ceases, but also because it never finds a solution, because it remains "unredeemed."

The great representative forms of this failure to find a solution, and the redemption that comes with it, generally take one of two directions:

Either the question "Why?" ends up against a stone wall, the bleak and comfortless conclusion that the whole thing is unfathomable, from which the next step is the nihilistic conclusion that the seemingly unfathomable has no basis at all and that therefore the world has no direction and is utterly fatherless.

Or the question "Why?" ends in the conclusion that the whole thing is nothing more than ice-cold mechanical laws and the utter silence of nature. A combination of the first and the second answers is found in the attempt to interpret the finite world "tragically"; in other words, to posit an order which is a fate that neither gods nor men can question and one never knows who has ordered it or what purpose it serves. This situation, which no longer has any understanding of judgment because it has lost the Judge, is itself judgment.

The deliverance which the message of the Bible proclaims in the face of this impenetrable problem of meaning, this painful

mystery of history, consists then not in a solution of the question "Why?" but rather in transforming it into the question "Whither?" and "To what end?"

I come back again to the story of the man born blind. The disciples asked, "Why was this man born blind; who sinned?" But Jesus asked, "To what end was this suffering appointed?" and then went on to answer, "that the works of God might be made manifest in him." The question "Why?" is directed backward to the past and seeks to fathom the causes. The answer it wants runs like this: Because of such and such, God did thus and so.

But this answer cannot be found. It is hidden in the counsel of God. The question "Whither?" and "To what end?" is not desirous of this answer, but is comforted in the certitude that we may confidently allow ourselves to be surprised, because we are being guarded and the Midgard serpent is not lurking on the horizon, for the foundation of the world is friendly and fatherly. So the Christian, facing the enigma of history, does not formulate a syllogism but rather says, "Nevertheless I am continually with thee" (Ps. 73:23). For he sees the judgment from the viewpoint of the Judge. And the Judge is none other than the Father, and Jesus Christ has assured us that we can call upon him and be his children.

It is the face of this Judge that will appear at the Last Judgment. Joseph Wittig once said that a man's biography ought really to begin not with his birth but with his death; it can be written only from the point of view of its end, because only from there can the whole of his life in its fulfillment be seen.

So, not until the world's last hour strikes, that hour of the second advent, when faith will see what it has believed and unbelief will be compelled to see what it has not believed—only that last hour of the world will make known the mystery of the meaning of history, the biography of the world.