

God's Pattern of Judgment

By Charles Clough

How are biblical descriptions of God's judgments such as "stars falling from heaven," "the moon turning red," and "great earthquakes" to be understood? Do they refer to literal astronomical and geophysical events, or are they merely exaggerated forms of speech and mere metaphors?

The proper way to understand prophecies of catastrophes is to follow the apostle Peter's approach and look at the true record of God's past historical judgments (2 Pet. 3:5-7). The universe, including all astronomical and geophysical processes, runs under the control of the Word of God rather than being the product of hypothesized natural laws (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3; 11:3). God has preserved in the Bible eyewitness observations that testify to sudden, precisely-designed catastrophes affecting the celestial heavens as well as planet earth.

The most catastrophic judgment ever to befall mankind is the Flood of Noah's day which radically altered the planet and which is used in Scripture to illustrate God's future end-time judgments (Matt. 24:37-39; Luke 17:26-27). The flood judgment had a specific pattern: **1**) the judgment came suddenly (Gen. 7:11), but only after a period of grace (Gen. 6:1-8), **2**) it involved the total physical environment in the heavens and the earth in ways previously unobserved (Gen. 6:17, cf. 2:5-6), **3**) it surgically and precisely separated the saved from the lost (Gen. 6:18-21, cf. 2 Pet. 2:5-9), and **4**) it included specific geophysical phenomena that manifested God's glory in supernatural fashion (Ps. 29:3 [cf. Gen. 8:1]; Ezek. 1:28; Rev. 4:3 [cf. Gen. 9:13-16]).

God continued this pattern of judgment throughout the subsequent history of Israel. The ten Exodus plague judgments consisted of suddenly occurring, intelligently directed phenomena that targeted specific objects. The visible fiery pillar between heaven and earth was the Angel of Yahweh, a theophany (Ex. 13:21). The crossing of the Red Sea featured unique meteorological and hydrodynamic phenomena (Ex. 14:21-29). Joshua was aided with "stones from heaven" that hit only enemy soldiers, while solar and lunar motion ceased (Josh. 10:11-14). Unusual celestial and atmospheric events occurred in the days of the Judges (Judg. 5:20-23) and of Samuel (1 Sam. 7:10). While David reigned, a precise seventy-two-hour plague that killed only Hebrews occurred (2 Sam. 24:10-25; 1 Chr. 21:9-27).

This judgment pattern is an inherent feature of God's rule as explained in the Mosaic covenant (Lev. 26; Deut. 28). It is the biblical answer to the problem of evil. God's determination to deal with the consequences of the fall extends not only to Israel but also to all nations (Deut. 30:7; 32:43; Isa. 34). The Old Testament prophets announced coming judgments within this pattern. Their prophecies of future judgments, therefore, use the vocabulary of these past judgments (e.g., Isa. 10:26; 11:15; 28:21; 29:6; Zech. 14:4-8).

The New Testament continues the Old Testament view that God judges with awesome power. Jesus and the apostle John repeat the familiar prophetic language of unprecedented physical judgments accompanied by theophanies (Matt. 24:29-30; Rev. 16:18). The same fire, smoke, hail, thunder, plague, and earthquake of the Old Testament judgments once again appear in Revelation 6-18. These terms are not exaggerations and metaphors. They point to a final culmination in God's program of separating good from evil throughout all creation. God's past judgments thus model His future judgments.

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For this they will be judged by the word of God, and the earth shall be burned up and in the water:

Whereby the world that is now, by the same word, shall be reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. But, beloved, be not ignorant, that one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count, because of long suffering to us, that we should perish, but he will have mercy on us, that we should repent.

The End of Christ's Kingdom

But the day of the Lord shall come as a thief in the night; in that day the heavens shall pass away with a roar, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall come, what manner of persons ought ye to be?

by the same word which created the Flood and fire, shall come the destruction of the heavens and the destruction of the earth.

one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. He is not bound by time, but in His mercy He will save the lost. He will not willfully punish the One who knows all things, but He will have mercy on a thousand years to finish His work.

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