

The Judgment of God (Archimandrite Peter, Abbot of Monastery of St John the Baptist, Essex UK)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



We meet three laws in this life. As soon as we appear in this world, even if our life is only one day, the first law we meet is the law of sin: 'For who shall be pure from uncleanness? not even one; if even his life should be but one day upon the earth' (Job 14:4-5). Then, we meet the law of death. Although there are many people who avoid thinking about death, this is the surest truth: our life will reach to an end. Thirdly, we meet the law of grace, which has come on earth through Christ, and through the gift of Pentecost. Depending on how we position ourselves with regard to these laws in this life, they can determine our eternity. God created Adam and endowed him with what the Fathers call 'noetic power', wherewith he could see the Face of God and live in His presence continually. When Adam accepted the injunction of the enemy, his attention returned to his own self and the consequence of that was his fall: Adam was expelled from the place of the presence of God. In

His great love, God attached pain and death to pleasure as a just punishment so that sin should not become immortal (see 1 Cor. 11:32). In fact, death is an act of the mercy of God. Therefore, Adam's unjust pleasure of sin and his disobedience to God were followed by the just punishment of pain and death.

Ever since, because of the fear of death, man sought a false consolation in sin, and the more he sins, the more death creeps in his life. This vicious circle could be broken only by an unjust death, which we see in the Person of Christ. What is really astonishing is that He did not sin, but He voluntarily took upon Himself the fruit of sin, which is death. Only His unjust death could condemn our just death caused by sin. The Lord had to condemn death 'in His very flesh' (cf. Eph. 2:15) through the Cross, because in everything He does, His justice precedes His almighty power. God does not have justice, He has mercy. Christ identified Himself with man to such an extent that He took upon Him his death and abandonment by God: 'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' (Matt. 27:46). Only after His unjust death did He reveal His almighty power by offering to all of us a new birth, not preceded by sin. Before, suffering and death were just a debt we had to pay for our fallenness, but after we receive this new birth in baptism, when we carry our personal cross for the sake of the commandment of Christ, we are initiated into the great Cross of our Saviour.



Saint Paul says that Christ condemned sin in His flesh (Rom. 8:3), whereas Saint Peter says, 'Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind: for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin' (1 Pet 4:1). I mention these terms, death and sin, because this is the pattern Saint Maximus uses in his 61st epistle to Thalassius, where he explains in an ingenious way that in Adam our nature was condemned to death through sin, whilst in Christ it is sin that was condemned to death. God created Adam with the ability to delight in His presence in an ineffable way, but he turned this capacity towards physical sensations and sensory objects, and thus he came to know an 'unjust pleasure' that was contrary to his nature. 'The unjust pleasure' is Adam's yielding to the suggestion of the enemy to become god without God. This is why Christ offered Saint Silouan the antidote of the unjust pleasure of Adam - the memory of hell, as the safest way to meet God.

Foreseeing the fall, God attached pain to the pleasure of sin as a chastising power, and so the law of death was wisely planted in our bodies in order to limit our intellect in its inclination towards sensory objects,' writes Saint Maximus. The unjust pleasure was followed by a just suffering and thus we are unable to experience pleasure without pain. When God said: 'If you eat, you shall die' (Gen. 2:17), it was in fact an act of love meant to limit this madness of the human intellect. We know that we die and look at how humanity lives on earth – the law of sin rules over the world. Man lives as if he never died. Imagine if there were no just punishment through death. Man would simply perish in this madness of sin. After eating from the fruit of the tree, Adam first suffered a spiritual death, and then the bodily death naturally followed. So, the unjust pleasure was followed by a just retribution, which was suffering and death. We have sinned and the debt which we must pay is death, whereas in Christ there was no cause of death that required a debt to be paid.

Ever since Adam's fall, our birth into this world is preceded by unjust pleasure and is therefore condemned to a just death. Absolutely no one is by nature free from a passionate birth conditioned in pleasure. Only Christ's birth of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary was free from sin. Every time man wants to avoid pain, he takes refuge in pleasure, and so the fear of death throws him even more into sin; the more he delivers himself to pleasure, the more death creeps in his life so that he cannot escape this endless circle of sin-death-more sin. Christ was born into this world without sin and He lived a sinless life. Therefore, He should not have died. However, He voluntarily took upon Him the consequence of sin, which is death, and in this way He vanquished death in His own flesh: 'death by death hath He destroyed.'

The unjust death of Christ condemns our just death which we brought upon ourselves through unjust pleasure, and gives us 'a just pleasure', a just joy, which is eternal life, the restoration of the human nature and the accomplishment of the purpose for which God created man. Through His death, Christ freed man from the just death of his sin. He subjected Himself to death, transforming death into a potential of life and man's weakness into a weapon for the destruction of sin and death. After the fall of Adam, death was the weapon with which sin destroyed man, but now, in Christ, death is the weapon with which He destroys sin. There is no other path: to live a Christian life means to take upon us death, the vulnerability of Christ. This is the reason why Christ offered death to Saint Silouan. 'Keep your mind in hell and despair not', in other words: 'Do not be afraid to go down to the end, because that is where I am.' Father Sophrony was confirmed by Saint Silouan about standing on the brink of the abyss of despair, and this is why he could then

practice this science without a doubt, being determined to do it to the end. And we know that this is how human nature is really sanctified and becomes 'other', not 'contrary to nature' but truly natural, as God created human nature in the beginning.

Through His suffering, Christ restored our nature and gave us a new birth, which we all receive in our baptism and which, through pain, ends in the pleasure of the life to come. Saint Maximus makes here a very important point: Christ has conquered death and gave life eternal to all human nature in a general way, but the same judgment must be repeated in a particular way in each one of us. In Christ, we receive a second, spiritual birth, which is not preceded by sin and is given to us through Baptism. However, the grace of Baptism remains inert if we do not activate it in our life through repentance and the keeping of the commandments. The most perfect way to keep the commandments is by keeping our mind in hell, for then we imitate this judgment of Christ, conquering death through death. If we are truly reborn in Christ, the judgment of Christ must be repeated in our life, and His judgment was that He took upon Himself unjust death and suffering. If in our repentance we follow Christ going downwards, our suffering is assimilated into His suffering and He makes our cross His Cross, rendering to us His glory. That is why Saint Peter says: 'If you suffer because you transgress, what glory is that? But if you suffer unjustly, there is great glory' (1 Pet. 2:20), 'ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away' (1 Pet. 5:4).

The judgment of the Son of God was the fulfilment of the commandment He had received from God the Father. Similarly, when we endure suffering for the sake of the commandments of the Lord, then the judgement of the Son of God is also repeated in us. This is why the Fathers of the Philokalia tell us that he who has received a commandment and fulfils it, mystically bears within himself all the Holy Trinity. Then, our own pain and suffering can also become a condemnation of death. If we understand this principle, we will never suffer from despair in our life.

Now the same judgment of God can and must be repeated in the house of God, which we are (1 Pet. 4:17). If we are aware that we have a God Who knows and understands us better than anyone else, we will follow the example of the saints: all our life will be a constant converse with Him. Christ's mind was constantly on the Father, His converse was with Him even in Gethsemane and on the Cross. His 'secret' strength to endure His Passion was the knowledge He had of the Father, as Saint Sophrony says. This is what we see in the saints: because of the injustices of men and of the wickedness of the enemy, some of them were deprived of everything in their life, of their health and even of material possessions. However,

the one thing they never allowed the enemy to deprive them of was the knowledge of the Lord. Many times the saints were allowed to go through the narrow path and were abandoned by God, so that they might come to know the fulness of the mystery of the love of Christ. If we have this knowledge and determination, we will not be shaken in our life, and whether we go up or down, we will learn always to converse with our Redeemer and our God.

In periods of crisis we must not seek false consolations, but turn to Him Who put Himself under every creature. The judgment of God is none other than His love. Father Sophrony says that on Judgment Day, our life will be revealed before God like a glass of water, in which one can see in one instant if there is something dirty. If we have purified our life, it will be revealed on that day. If every time we suffer in this life, we deliver ourselves to the judgment of Christ, this will give us a precious treasure: the knowledge of Christ, which is the only thing we take with us in the other life. Our Holy Fathers were 'possessed' by the mind of Christ, by the humble way in which He chose to save us, and this is what made them strong.

We find such an example in the Old Testament in the person of Patriarch Jacob. Jacob prayed a whole night in the desert when his brother Esau was hunting to kill him. He even wrestled with God saying, 'I will not leave You until You bless me.' Then, God came and wounded Jacob on his thigh. This wound is what Saint Paul will call later the 'circumcision of the heart'. Every man who stands in prayer pouring out his heart before God seeking for His blessing, will receive this wound from God, and it is this humble wound in the heart that informs the hearts of the people around us, even of our enemies. When Esau met Jacob, as soon as he saw him, he simply embraced him, for he was conquered by the wound by which Jacob himself had been conquered in his wrestling with God.

In his last book on monasticism, Father Zacharias writes: 'The knowledge of the love of God is concealed behind His chastisement and this knowledge casts out fear.' God's chastisement is the manifestation of His Fatherly love and if we know this, all fear is cast out.

Now, because of the pandemic, we are deprived from the communion of love with the other Christians which we have in the Liturgy, but if every time we are deprived from anything in our life, we surrender to God's Providence with full trust, this will make our bond with God stronger and stronger. Our eternal bond with Christ is marked by all these critical moments of our life when we go through deprivation and abandonment. If we deliver all our heart and all our life into the hands of God saying, 'Be it unto me, O Lord, according to Thy will,' such moments will build our eternal bond with Christ.

Archimandrite Zacharias: This letter explains so well this mystery, that through sin death creeps into our life and through voluntary struggle against sin, life creeps into our death, life eternal. Herein lies the beauty of monastic obedience: we do not yield to our own will, but through obedience we do the will of God, and then strength is given to overcome death, even in us. Christ's innocent death became a condemnation of our guilty death and every time man dies for the sake of the commandment, he will be surely glorified. This is the importance of voluntary asceticism in the monastic life, and in Christian life in general: through a taste of death in voluntary asceticism, we are granted the grace to rise above death. That is why we sing at Easter 'Yesterday I was dying with Thee, O, Lord. Today I rise together with Thee through Thy Resurrection'. This theory is so important for contemporary people, because they cannot understand the meaning of suffering and many blame God for it.

Question: We see that through sin, not only unjust pleasure is accompanied by pain, but also spiritual joy. Practically, in this life, if we want spiritual joy, it must be accompanied by pain. But if it is a just pleasure, why is it accompanied by pain?

Archimandrite Zacharias: Pain eradicates sin and the passions. Where there is no passion, there is joy, there is spiritual freedom, there is happiness. A young man asked the great ascetic Pimen: 'Abba, is it permitted to have a glass of wine with my food?' And the saint answered: 'If there is no devil (that is, no passion), yes.' Then the young man asked the second time: 'Abba, is it permitted to have two glasses of wine?' He answered again: 'If there is no devil, yes, it is permitted'. It is the same in our relations with people: the same thing could be a great sin and it can be a holy thing, depending on where the heart is, on whether there is a passion, a wrong desire. For him who is free from passions, everything is holy.

Archimandrite Peter: We call it a 'just pleasure' because it first occurred in Christ. He initiated the path and we are made partakers of this just pleasure because we follow Him, not because it is a just reward or a merit that we deserve.

For unjust pleasure, pain is a chastising power, as Saint Maximus says, whereas for spiritual, just pleasure, pain becomes a weapon.

Other Questions and Answers on Various Themes

Question: How can we convey this importance of the Cross in our lives to teenagers that have a difficult past and problems with their families?

Archimandrite Peter: It is a very delicate subject, but the mystery of the Cross has a word (1 Cor. 1:18). Saint Gregory Palamas says that the Cross was a mystery active from the beginning of the world, but it remains a mystery even after Christ. How can one explain that His self-emptying and humiliation becomes a cause for incorruptible glory? When this mystery is secretly active in our lives, this Cross has a word for the other people, in the sense that they can feel the power of this mystery in us. This is the strongest and safest way to give witness to the mystery of the Cross of Christ: not to preach, especially if we are not appointed by the Church, but to live it ourselves.

Question: Why do we sometimes feel God close to us and other times we feel Him very far?

Archimandrite Peter: Our nature is weak and cannot bear the presence of God for long. In order for our nature to be strengthened, we need these alternations: when God is far from us, we learn to humbly blame ourselves and thank Him even for that. When He is with us, we must worship Him with fear: 'Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling,' says the Psalm (Ps. 2:11). When He is with us, it is even more scary, for we know that, unstable as we are, we can offend His grace very easily. When we lose the sense of His presence, we must blame ourselves and use this loss for our humility, knowing that He will not allow us to be tempted more than what we can bear (1 Cor. 10:13).

Question: How can we practice hesychasm in the noisy environment we live in?

Archimandrite Peter: Someone who works in the city and has a family cannot practice hesychia like a hermit, but he must not allow his heart to remain dry, without prayer. In principle, we must be aware of the conditions of our life and have the discernment not to seek ways that are too heavy for our circumstances. From a hesychast God will not expect missionary work, but prayer, and the desert gives him conditions for this particular way of life. The hesychasts seek to live constantly in the presence of God, but they are given specific conditions of life and they will be judged accordingly. To practice hesychasm in the city is rather impossible, otherwise the Fathers would not have gone to the desert to practice hesychia.

However, hesychasm can be a guiding star for all of us. The Sunday Liturgy is a moment of hesychia for every Christian. If we neglect going to Church on Sunday, we cannot talk about the Jesus Prayer and hesychia. On the seventh day of creation, God rested (Gen. 2:2), He returned to the bosom of the pre-eternal love of the Trinity. This is what we also need to do. That is why Sunday should belong to the Lord. We can try to have a portion of prayer daily, but especially on Sunday, so that our heart does not remain bereft of the presence of God.

Question: Can seeking for spiritual guidance make us neglect talking to God in our hearts?

Archimandrite Peter: On Mount Athos, even after long years of monastic obedience, monks will still seek for guidance, because they consider it a sign of spiritual health. If we are to converse with God, we first need to know His language, and we cannot do this without guidance. If we humbly and honestly seek for the Face of God, the guidance will lead us to that. In the Church, the Liturgy, spiritual fatherhood, prayer, the word of God, all these become one life. If we seek for guidance in a healthy way, the guidance will surely help us learn how to converse with God. Also, the spiritual father wants to espouse every soul as a bride to the Bridegroom, Christ. If a person remains too much on the psychological level, the spiritual father will say like Saint John the Baptist, 'He must increase, I must decrease' (John 3:30), and he will help the person to rise from the psychological level.

Question: How can we find consolation now that we cannot visit the Monastery?

Archimandrite Peter: During these seven months, many people were deprived even of the Liturgy. Forgive my boldness, but if we use properly this suffering, it can even become a privilege. This virus is a persecution for the whole world, it created such an unprecedented crisis. However, we know that in times of crisis the grace of God is poured out more tangibly. If we are deprived of our Church or of visiting the Monastery, we must use all the other means: studying the word of God diligently, calling upon His Name. Then surely God will use them to pour out in our hearts the same grace that we used to receive in the Liturgy, because it is not something we can choose. God will make up for what we are deprived of. Of course, under normal conditions, if we do not go to Church, we cannot expect to find grace in our prayer.

Question: If the virus gets to us and we are on our deathbed, how should we pray?

Archimandrite Peter: When all our constitution is disintegrating, it is quite likely

that we will not be able to pray. That is why we need to begin preparing for that moment from now. Every morning Father Sophrony's first thought was death. He mentions death in his prayer at daybreak. However, if we find the strength to pray on our deathbed, we should mention three things. First, thank God for all His benefits towards us in our whole life. Second, ask forgiveness for all the times we wounded, offended and betrayed Him. Finally, we should ask Him to accept us even as we are.

Question: How can one be and remain a true Christian in this world where everything forces us to focus on self-love and the seducing pleasures of life?

Archimandrite Peter: Precisely now is the challenge to be a Christian. The Lord said, 'When the Son of Man comes again will He find faith upon earth?' (Luke 18:8). The more we approach the end of time, the more the love of many will grow cold (Matt. 24:12), but this is also a great challenge. I noticed that nowadays people are crushed by the general atmosphere of lust and sin that reigns in this world. Yet even this becomes an opportunity for God to enter in their heart and to make a change so that they realise the vanity of such a life. When we see wars, illnesses, famines and pestilences happening, the Lord does not say 'run to the mountains and hide,' but 'lift up your heads for your redemption is nigh' (Luke 21:28). Thus, the times we are living are a calling for us to lift up our heads, not to despair, but rather to activate more our spiritual bond with Christ and make it stronger, by preparing for the day that He will annul the spirit of the wicked with the spirit of His mouth (2 Thess. 2:8).