Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Here is a question for you sporty types; how do you feel when the ref makes a wrong call against your team? Very upset, right?! And of course, this is why every professional sport has embraced TV referrals. We demand fair and just decisions in sports. And of course, the same is true in law courts. When we read about someone who has committed a very serious crime getting what seems to be a very light sentence, we demand justice. And how about this scenario: Your house burns down, and you file an insurance claim, but it is denied because of a clause that was inserted into your policy, after you had signed it, and the insurance company never let you know about it. Would you let the matter go? Of course, not. You would call a lawyer or ring Fair-go, because that is plainly unjust.

We really, really value justice, don’t we. Each one of us has a very strong, inbuilt sense of fairness and justice, especially when it comes to ourselves and our rights and entitlements. And of course, this is not something that parents have to teach their children, is it. They understand justice and fairness from their earliest days. For example, if you tell your children that they can play on the Ipad for 10 minutes each, and one child gets 11 minutes, just watch the sparks fly!

Well, given how much we all value justice, you would think that people would have no problem with God being a just God. But is that what we find? No, it is not. They are OK with a God who is loving and merciful and patient, but not a God who is and angry and vengeful, who punishes sin. And related to this, people like the idea of heaven but they are not so keen about the idea of hell. And if they are OK with the hell, it is for people like Hitler and Stalin, and a few other, really bad people, but not for them.

And sadly, even amongst those who claim to be Christians, you sometimes hear them say that the God of the Old Testament is an angry God of justice, but the God of the New Testament is a God of love and mercy. Have you heard that view of God before? It is quite common in the wider church, today.

Well, we should want to understand God as He has revealed Himself to us. And He has done that in the Bible. So, is the God of the Bible a just God? And if He is, what are the implications of Him being a just God? What does this mean for all people, including us? Well, what we are going to see today is that **the Bible plainly reveals God as** **a just judge who must punish sin**. And we will see this in three points …

1. … with the first being that **God is a Just Judge**.
   1. Now, so that we are all clear and on the same page, what Testament of the Bible is Hebrews in? The **NEW** Testament. We are not in Deuteronomy or Kings or Amos; we are in the NEW Testament :-)
   2. And in terms of **context**, Hebrews was written to mainly Jewish believers who were thinking of abandoning Christianity and going back to Judaism. So, the author of Hebrews takes the main aspects of religious life from the Old Testament, like angels, Moses, the High Priest, the Temple, and the sacrifices, and he shows how Jesus is the fulfilment of and is greater than each of them.
      1. And with chapter 10, we come to the **So what? of Hebrews**; the two responses to the message of God’s amazing grace in Jesus Christ. And the two responses are the *right* response and *wrong* response. The right response is to believe in Christ and to draw near to Him in full assurance of faith and to be an active part of a local congregation. And that is spelled out in verses 19-25. But from verse 26, we see the wrong response.
      2. It is addressed to those who would “*go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth*.” So, these are people who had heard the gospel and understood it. Perhaps they were raised in Christian homes or had come into the church, but they have experienced life in the church. And yet, because of persecution or the temptations of the world, they were no longer sure that they wanted to follow Christ and obey His commandments. So, that’s the context.
   3. So, **what sort of God** does the author of Hebrews direct such people to? Does he describe a great big teddy-bear in the sky, sort of God? You know, a soft, cuddly, not at all concerned with sin sort of God? Is that the sort of God that is described here? No. Instead, such people are called to “*a fearful expectation of judgment and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.*” In verse 30, he says of God, “*For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge His people."”*
      1. And to any who are perhaps hearing these words with their full force for the first time, and are thinking to themselves, wow! that sounds like Old Testament language!? You are quite correct. In fact, you will see that two parts of verse 30 are in quotation marks. And they are quotes from the passage in Deuteronomy 32 that we read earlier in the service. As part of the song that Moses sung to the people of Israel just before he died, He warned them to not disobey the commands of God. And the reason he gave them to not disobey is who God is. He said, “*Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly.'*”
         1. And we see this same truth about God elsewhere in Scripture:
            1. Psalm 94:1: “*O LORD, God of vengeance, O God of vengeance, shine forth!*”
            2. Isaiah 59:17, The Lord “*put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; He put on garments of vengeance for clothing*.”
            3. Nahum 1:2: “*The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on His adversaries and keeps wrath for His enemies*.”
            4. So, God is a God of vengeance. He is a God of justice. And this is true of God in Old Testament times and in New Testament times, for, as God said of Himself in **Malachi 3:6**, “*I the LORD do not change*.”
         2. And we see this also with the second quote in verse 30 of our text, which says, “*The Lord will judge His people*.” And this quote also comes from **Deuteronomy 32**. In our ESVs, it says, “*The LORD will vindicate His people*.” But there is a marginal note by the word ‘vindicate,’ which explains that ‘judge’ is another way to translate the word. And that is the word that other English versions use. And this too is a common and plain teaching of the Bible:
            1. Psalm 96:13: The Lord “*comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness*.”
            2. Psalm 98:9: The Lord “*comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity*.”
            3. Psalm 135:14: “*For the LORD will judge His people*.”
            4. Ezekiel 34:17: “*As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats*.”
            5. And we see God as Judge **also in the New Testament**:

In Matthew 12:36, Jesus said, “*I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak*.”

And in John 5:28-29 He said, “*Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment*.”

In Acts 17:31, Paul said, The Lord “*has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom He has appointed*.”

2 Corinthians 5:10: “*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil*.”

Hebrews 9:27: “*And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment*.”

1. So, as we have seen, God’s word is quite plain: He is **a just judge**. And because of who He is, and as we have already begun to see, **He must punish sin**. And this is our second point.
   1. Consider this scenario: If a parent gave a child a spoonful of good and tasty food, and the child took the food in his or her mouth, and then spat the food at the parent, and smacked the bowl of food down onto the floor, what ought to happen? Should the parent congratulate the child for expressing themselves? Or should they offer them a different type of food? Sadly, those are probably what today’s ‘child-raising-experts’ would suggest. But that is not what should happen; what should happen is punishment. The parent is the authority. The food being offered is a good gift. It ought to be received with thankfulness. And what the child has done is an act of disrespect and unthankfulness. And I hope that we all get this. Behaviour like this deserves to be punished.
   2. And we see this same principle here in our text. In verse 27, we see that for those who go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of truth there is “*a fearful expectation of judgment and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.*” And then we get an explanation for why there ought to be this fearful expectation of judgment in verses 28-29. And it comes from **Deuteronomy 17**.
      1. There, Moses said that if one of the Israelites worshiped an idol, “*you shall stone that man or woman to death with stones. On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death*.”
         1. And this was not God being extreme; this was God being just. He had rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt and He was going to bring them to the Promised Land. So, He deserved their exclusive worship and thankfulness; worshipping idols would be the height of rebellion and unthankfulness toward God. And so, idolatry had to be punished, severly.
      2. Now, that was in the time when all that the people of Israel had were shadows and types of Jesus. They had memories or stories of the Red-Sea crossing and Manna and the pillar of cloud, and they had the law and the ceremonies and sacrifices. But that was enough to make them deserving of death by stoning if they worshipped idols. But now **Jesus has come**. We can know exactly who Jesus is and what He did on the cross and what He is doing now in heaven.
      3. And those that the author of Hebrews wrote to knew and understood all this about Jesus. And so, He says, “*How much* ***worse punishment****, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?*” So, whoever hears the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus, and especially those who hear and understand and outwardly profess faith and participate in a church for as time, and then turn their back on Him, can expect a worse punishment than those who were stoned to death in Old Testament times!
      4. And what is the **worse punishment** that is in view? Well, God no longer demands that idolaters be stoned to death by the governing authorities. That was the punishment for the time when God was Israel’s government. But do not, for a moment, think that God no longer cares about idolatry. And remember that the refusal to worship Jesus is idolatry – it is to choose another god instead of the true God, whether that be self or Allah or Buddha or money or sex or food or drink or anything else. And we don’t have time to go into this in detail, today, but idolatry still brings severe consequences *in this life*. God is very clear about this in Romans 1, for example. And sadly, we are seeing more and more of the individual and societal consequences of idolatry unfolding all around us. So, idolatry is still punished *now*, by the Lord.
      5. But the worse punishment in view in our text is hinted at in the words “*a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries*.” What do you think that is referring to? It is a reference to hell.
         1. And again, for any who have fallen for the lie that Jesus is all about love and peace, *read the Gospels again*. For the topic that He spoke most about is judgment and hell.
            1. In Matthew 3, He talks about unfruitful trees being thrown into “*unquenchable fire*.”
            2. In Matthew 5, He warns that those who call their brother Fool “*will be liable to the hell of fire*.”
            3. In Matthew 7, He said again that unfruitful trees will be “*cut down and thrown into the fire*.”
            4. In Matthew 10, Jesus said, “*Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell*.”
            5. In Matthew 13, He said that “*The Son of Man will send His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all … law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*
            6. In Matthew 18, He says, “*If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire*.”
            7. In Matthew 23, Jesus said to the Pharisees, “*You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?*”
            8. In Matthew 25, He said that on Judgment Day, He will “*say to those on His left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*.” **And that’s just Matthew**!
      6. In **Revelation 21**, we read a beautiful description of heaven, where there is no more death or pain, and every tear is wiped away. And this is where believers will spend eternity. But this is what we read next: “*But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death*.”
         1. And so, our Catechism answer is correct when it states that God’s “justice demands that sin, committed against His supreme majesty, be punished with the supreme penalty – eternal punishment of body and soul.”
         2. Hell is a real place; it is an awful place. And people have tried to come up with all sorts of reasons to ignore hell or explain it away, but God’s word is plain – hell is a real place of unquenchable fire and torment, because God, as a just judge, must punish sin.
   3. You know, sometimes people express a dislike for what they call ‘hell fire and damnation preaching.’ Have you heard that description before? And those who dislike hell-fire and damnation preaching say that you shouldn’t try and put the fear of hell into people as a reason for why they should believe in Jesus. Well, certainly no one should *only* preach hell-fire and damnation sermons, or preach about hell without preaching about salvation in Jesus, but as we see here in Hebrews 10 and throughout the Bible, if you are to preach the full gospel, you must preach the reality of hell and judgment.
2. And all this is why, as our third and last point, **we should fear the Lord**. Verse 31 says: “*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*.”
   1. We have seen that the God of Old Testament times is the God of New Testament times. He is still a just judge who must punish sin now and in eternity. And before anything else, **this truth preaches a powerful message about the cross**.
      1. And we will obviously have much more to say about this in the coming weeks as we begin the next section of the Catechism, which has to do with man’s deliverance.
      2. But “if God is terribly angry about the sin we are born with as well as the sins we personally commit,” and “His justice demands that sin … be punished with the supreme penalty, eternal punishment of body and soul,” then we can only stand in awe and silence at the foot of the cross.
      3. For the good news of the gospel is that God sent His Son to earth, to the cross, and He poured out His terrible anger and punished His beloved Son with the supreme penalty, eternal punishment of body and soul, so that He is free to show mercy to whoever believes in Him.
      4. Do you understand this? God is a just God who must punish sin. **But Jesus gets the justice so we can get the mercy!**  That is the gospel! And we get the mercy the moment we repent and believe!
   2. We referred earlier to **Matthew 25**, which is where Jesus describes the Day of Judgment. “*He will place the sheep on His right, but the goats on the left.*” And the sheep are those who received Him and believed in Him. And to them, Jesus “*will say … 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world*.” The goats are those who refused to believe in Him. And, to them, Jesus “*will say … 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*.”
      1. And as we have seen in our text, it is possible to appear to be a sheep for a time, only to reveal yourself, later on, to actually be a goat. And these are those who outwardly profess faith for a time, but then turn their back on Christ and refuse to follow Him and obey His commands.
      2. And these words have relevance to all of us who have been in church for some time and have heard and understood the gospel, but especially to you young people who have grown up in Christian families. You have experienced the blessings of life in the church. You know the truth about Jesus. Do not turn your back on Christ. For those who have heard the Gospel and have rejected Jesus, the punishment in hell will be more severe than for those who have not heard the gospel.

Congregation, God is a just judge who must punish sin. And that is why “*it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*.” But may it be that Jesus has fallen into His hands so that you do not need to. And may it be that we will all be among those who hear Jesus say, “*Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world*.” Amen.