

Siding with grace: Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

How do the blessed feel when they think of the damned?

by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#) in the [July 31, 2002](#) issue

Q: “What comfort does the return of Christ ‘to judge the living and the dead’ give you?”

A: “That in all affliction and persecution I may await with head held high the very Judge from heaven who has already submitted himself to the judgment of God for me and has removed all the curse from me. . . . He shall take me, together with all his elect, to himself into heavenly joy and glory.”

— *Heidelberg Catechism*

Throughout the history of Christian thought, some have claimed that salvation is essentially and finally an exclusive affair. “We shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be,” writes John Calvin, “that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God’s free mercy until we come to know his eternal election, which illumines God’s grace by this contrast: that God does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation but gives to some what God denies to others.”

At the heart of this difficult doctrine is the proclamation that our lives and our deaths are in God’s hand; we are loved of God not by our own merit but by God’s gracious initiative toward us. We need not spend our lives in good works in order to be saved but only in grateful response to being so loved. Still, there is that menacing little caveat that thrust the Canaanite woman upon Jesus’ mercy: *If* we are among the saved.

In the play *Angels in America*, Prior, a character living with AIDS, describes the arrival of his ancestor, a ship captain who made his living by bringing whale oil to the Old World and immigrants to the New World. When his ship sank off the coast of Nova Scotia in a winter tempest, the captain went down with the ship. But the crew took 70 women and kids in a big, open rowboat. When the weather was rough, the

crew thought the boat was overcrowded. In an effort to get the ballast “right,” they picked up survivors and tossed them into the sea. But the boat was also leaking. As the boat sank lower, more people were sacrificed, until the crew arrived in Halifax with only nine people on board.

“I think about that story a lot now,” says Prior from his sickbed. “People in a boat, waiting, terrified, while implacable, unsmiling men, irresistibly strong, seize . . . maybe the person next to you, maybe you, and with no warning at all, with time only for a quick intake of air you are pitched into freezing, turbulent water and salt and darkness to drown.”

How, ask the old theologians, do the blessed feel when they think of the damned? “The thought does not trouble them,” they say. “On the contrary, when they look at the damned they rejoice that God’s honor is so great.” I think about this doctrine a lot in a time when the church, more and more, appears to be a leaky boat in the hands of implacable, unsmiling Christians who are determined to get the ballast right.

Old theologians notwithstanding, there is another reading of the biblical witness. If this reading errs, it errs on the side of grace. On the deck of this lifeboat the ballast is miraculously maintained—no matter the accumulated weight and woes of its passengers—by One whose placability knows no end. Karl Barth, perhaps the most prominent spokesperson for such a reading of the biblical witness in our time, says:

Would it not be better in the time of grace in which we still live to proclaim to all people this good news . . . to confess and bear witness that Christ died for all . . . that Christ suffered also for them. Then the contrast between the elect and the damned can continue to concern us only humorously. For the elect who awaits his Judge with head held high, there can be no alternative but to proclaim this Judge to those who do not yet know him and thus to remain in solidarity with all [people]. But this means that all pictures of judgment day are wrong. They are profoundly unchristian pictures.

So it is that the final scene of a play about people many consider damned might be, in Barth’s terms, a more profoundly Christian picture of judgment day than the one in the Heidelberg Catechism. Prior, who has been living with AIDS for five years, stands at his favorite place: the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park. This is the angel

of Bethesda, he says. Louis, his former Jewish lover, explains. "She was this angel, she landed in the Temple square in Jerusalem, in the days of the Second Temple, right in the middle of a working day she descended and just her foot touched the earth. And where it did, a fountain shot up from the ground. When the Romans destroyed the Temple, the fountain of Bethesda ran dry." Belize, Prior's gay African-American friend, continues the story. "If anyone who was suffering, in the body or spirit, walked through the waters of the fountain of Bethesda, they would be healed, washed clean of pain." "When the Millennium comes," breaks in Hannah, a matronly white Mormon mother who has cared for all three men, "the fountain of Bethesda will flow again. And I told Prior I would personally take him there to bathe. We will all bathe ourselves clean."

What comfort does the return of Christ "to judge the living and the dead" give us? Simply this: that he comes to judge us all and save us all. In the meantime, the least we can do is keep afloat and together in the church and in the world for his sake.