

# The God of Grace *and* Judgment



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *1 Cor. 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:10; Genesis 3; Genesis 6; John 3:17–21; Rev. 14:6, 7.*

**Memory Text:** “For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (*Ecclesiastes 12:14*).

**Key Thought:** God’s judgment is as pervasive in the Bible as is the theme of salvation; in fact, the two teachings are intricately entwined.

A soldier stood next to an old man about to be executed. He was guilty of being the “wrong” race and religion, nothing more. As the soldier raised his gun, his victim said, “Do you know that there is a God in heaven who sees all this, and who will one day judge you for your actions?”

The soldier then shot the old man dead.

This is, in many ways, a prime example of a secular society. Not a secular government (a government that does not promote one religion over another), but a secular society—one in which there is no higher standard than the rules of the society itself. It’s a society with no sense of transcendence, no sense of a higher authority, no sense of God or of a moral standard greater than anything human. It’s a society where humans take the place of God, a society where the only judgment one faces is the judgment of one’s peers or of one’s own conscience (whatever’s left of it, anyway).

According to the Bible, however, the old man was right: there is a God in heaven, and He knows all things and He, indeed, will bring everything into judgment.

*\*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 28.*

## Judgment Day

The theme of divine judgment runs through the entire Bible. Contrary to common beliefs, judgment is not contrary to salvation or to the gospel. Both themes are woven together in Scripture from Genesis through Revelation.

And no wonder. Judgment and salvation reflect twin aspects of God's character: His justice and grace. Thus, we should not pit the idea of judgment against the idea of salvation any more than we should pit the idea of God's justice against His grace. To do so is to rob both of their fullness and mutual complementarity. Scripture teaches both; hence, we need to understand both.

What is interesting is that the New Testament talks more about judgment than does the Old Testament.

**Read** the following verses. What are they about? Who is judged? What happens in these judgments? What do these texts reveal about the nature and reality of divine judgment?

*Eccles. 12:13, 14* \_\_\_\_\_

*1 Cor. 3:13* \_\_\_\_\_

*2 Cor. 5:10* \_\_\_\_\_

*Heb. 10:30* \_\_\_\_\_

*Matt. 16:27* \_\_\_\_\_

*Rev. 20:12* \_\_\_\_\_

*Rev. 22:12* \_\_\_\_\_

*Matt. 12:36, 37* \_\_\_\_\_

*1 Pet. 4:17* \_\_\_\_\_

*Rev. 14:6, 7* \_\_\_\_\_

These are a sample of the texts that clearly teach judgment. Many of the most explicit judgment texts, texts that clearly reveal the reality of divine judgment, or judgments, appear in the New Testament. This fact works against the notion that judgment is contrary to the new-covenant concept of God's grace, which is also taught in the New Testament. What this should teach us is that, however we understand judgment, and however we understand grace, we must understand them as divine truths that work together. To pit one against the other is to misunderstand the fullness of the gospel, which we looked at last week.

## Judgment and Grace in Eden

Think about this: before sin, there was no need of grace because there was nothing to forgive, nothing to pardon, nothing to cover. It's the same with judgment. Before sin, there was nothing to judge, nothing to condemn, nothing to be punished. Both grace and judgment arise, at least in a human context, only because of humanity's sin.

**Read** Genesis 3, the account of the Fall. In what ways are the themes of judgment and grace revealed?

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Satan succeeded in bringing sin into the world, changing everything as a result. Immediately, though, the Lord entered, calling out, "Where are you?" This question doesn't have to be seen as condemnatory; it was more an invitation to come to Him, the One who created and loved them. It was a call to turn away from their deceiver and to return to their Maker.

Notice, too, what happens. The first few lines from the mouth of God in this fallen world are questions (*see Gen. 3:9, 11, 13*). Then the first thing God says after He's finished questioning is to declare His judgment against the serpent. But next, in verse 15, even amid His judgment against the serpent, what does God say?

Verse 15 is the first gospel promise. As soon as He declares His judgment against the serpent, He then immediately gives the first message of grace, of redemption, of salvation for humanity. And only then, only after that gospel promise, does He start declaring His judgments against the woman and the man. Although they fell, the first things God gives them are hope and grace—the grace that forms the background against which judgment is to unfold. Thus, even before judgment, the promise of grace is given for those who will accept it.

It's too late for Satan; his destruction is assured. But there, even amid the judgments passed on to the man and the woman, God makes His grace known.

At the beginning of fallen human history, a relationship between sin, judgment, and God's grace emerges. Although God must judge and condemn sin, the promise of grace is always there, always present, always available for those who will claim it for themselves.

**In what ways might the Lord be saying to you, "Where are you?" What are you doing that, perhaps, is causing you to hide from Him? Why is understanding grace a crucial first step in heeding His call to draw near to Him and away from the deceiver?**

## The Flood

Critics of the Bible make a big deal of the fact that other ancient civilizations had their own flood stories. They argue that the Bible story isn't unique, original, or even true, but that it is merely a copy of some previous myth or legend.

On the other hand, those who believe that the Bible is the Word of God see these stories as a confirmation of the reality of the Flood. The Flood happened, and Genesis gives the inspired account of it. This account stands in contrast to the other versions, such as the one that says the Flood was sent because humans in their nightly feasting made too much noise and disturbed the gods' sleep. The gods, cranky from lack of rest, sent the flood to punish them.

**What** reason does the biblical account of the Flood give for the judgment that was to come upon the earth? *Gen. 6:5.*

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The idea of humans being so evil that they deserved death and destruction shouldn't be that hard to fathom for us today, living as we do in a world where evil just gets worse and worse. The Christian view of human sinfulness, although often derided, is constantly being verified. That we are capable of good deeds doesn't make us good. After all, American mobster Al Capone loved children, was generous to a fault, and treated his friends kindly. Who, though, would call him a good man?

**Even** amid the impending promise of retributive judgment, how is God's grace revealed in the Flood account? (*See Gen. 6:14–22, 2 Pet. 2:5.*)

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By building the ark, Noah was giving the world a warning about judgment. What's implied, too, is that there was a grace period, a chance for the world to turn from its evil ways and accept God's salvation. Ellen G. White wrote that had "the antediluvians believed the warning, and repented of their evil deeds, the Lord would have turned aside His wrath."—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 97. The building of the ark offered anyone who would heed the warning a refuge of safety from the coming destruction. No question, judgment was coming. But grace was offered to all who would accept it until it was too late, and the door of mercy was shut.

**How often has God revealed His grace to you? More times than you can count, probably. How can you learn to better surrender to that grace and let it mold you into the image of Christ?**

## Condemnation and Grace

Most everyone is familiar with John 3:16. What comes afterward, however, helps flesh it out and explain it even better.

**Read** John 3:17–21. What does it say about judgment? About grace? In what way do these verses reveal to us the way in which grace and judgment work together?

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The word translated as “condemn” in verse 17 is also translated in some versions as “judge.” Clearly, though, the context is that of condemnation, because God has made it clear in numerous other places that the world will be judged.

Two themes appear in these texts, grace and judgment, and they are radically intertwined. Sin and darkness and evil have brought the need for a God of justice to judge and condemn these things. At the same time, God’s grace offers a way out to those who are guilty, and that comes by faith in Jesus Christ.

He who believes in Jesus is not condemned. That’s what the texts say. It’s that simple. Christ’s righteousness covers that person, and that person stands without condemnation, now and in the judgment.

**What** reason do the texts give for condemnation?

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According to these texts, the default state of humanity is that of condemnation. That’s because all have sinned and all deserve the death that sin brings. These texts clearly debunk the notion that, after the Cross, all humanity is automatically justified. Instead, after the Cross, the whole condemned world is now offered salvation through the atoning death of Jesus Christ, which is sufficient for every human being. Everyone stands condemned; everyone, though, who, through the grace of Christ, accepts the provision offered, stands pardoned, justified, and redeemed through Jesus. The condemnation that is theirs is, through the merits of Jesus, canceled, and they stand in His perfect righteousness.

In fact, what does grace mean apart from the prospect of condemnation? Just as the idea of condemnation implies judgment, so does the idea of grace. Were there no potential for judgment (and condemnation), there would be no need for grace. The notion of grace itself all but demands the notion of condemnation. Hence, more reason to see how grace and judgment are linked.

## The Hour of His Judgment

**“Fear them not therefore: for there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known”** (*Matt. 10:26*).

Looking around at the world, we shouldn't have a problem understanding the idea of judgment and condemnation. One doesn't have to be a believing Christian to realize that something is radically wrong with humanity. Who can't see what a royal mess, even disaster, we've made of things? Maybe we cry so hard at birth because, instinctively, we know what's coming. "I cried when I was born and every day shows why," a poet wrote. Who can't relate? Who hasn't been the victim of just how greedy, selfish, and mean people can be? Or who hasn't at some point been the greedy, selfish, and mean one?

Thus, if God is just, and if justice was His only major attribute, who among us would stand before Him? If the Lord knows even our secret things, our secret deeds (*Eccles. 12:14*) (not to mention what we have done in public), what chance would even the godliest among us have on the day of judgment, when all these things will be revealed?

Fortunately, though, our God is also a God of grace. The whole plan of salvation was established so that every human being could, ideally, be spared the condemnation that God's justice would demand. Without grace, we'd all be consumed by God's justice. Our only hope, then, standing before a just God, is grace.

**Read** the first angel's message in Revelation 14:6, 7. How do these verses reveal the link between God's justice and His grace? How do they also parallel what we saw in Genesis 3 regarding the relationship between grace and judgment?

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How interesting that before the warning that the "hour of His judgment has come" (*NKJV*), the angel is proclaiming the "everlasting gospel." It has to be that way, otherwise the judgment would condemn all humanity. No one would have a chance because all have sinned, all have violated God's law. Here, among the last warning message to the world, God's grace is proclaimed. Otherwise, judgment would condemn everyone, without exception. Without grace, what message would we have for the world other than that God is going to destroy us all and there's no hope of escape? Fortunately, the message we have has the "everlasting gospel" as its foundation.

**What role are you playing in helping to spread this message of judgment and grace to others? What more could you do to help spread it because, most likely, you could be doing more, right?**

**Further Study:** How do grace and judgment work together? Here's how inspiration reveals it:

“While Jesus is pleading for the subjects of His grace, Satan accuses them before God as transgressors. The great deceiver has sought to lead them into skepticism, to cause them to lose confidence in God, to separate themselves from His love, and to break His law. Now he points to the record of their lives, to the defects of character, the unlikeness to Christ, which has dishonored their Redeemer, to all the sins that he has tempted them to commit, and because of these he claims them as his subjects.

“Jesus does not excuse their sins, but shows their penitence and faith, and, claiming for them forgiveness, He lifts His wounded hands before the Father and the holy angels, saying: I know them by name. I have graven them on the palms of my hands.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 484.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 How does the above quote help you to understand the role of grace in the judgment? How does Ellen White describe God's faithful people, and why is that important? How clearly do you see yourself described there?
- 2 Imagine standing before God with everything that you have ever done, good and bad, exposed? How well would you fare? Would you be able to stand before God on the basis of your good deeds, even the ones done out of the sincerest and most honest of motives? Do you really think that they would be enough to commend you before your Maker? How does your answer help you understand the need of grace?
- 3 What's the deadly spiritual trap of thinking that it doesn't matter what we do because we're saved by grace? How can you protect yourself against falling into that deception?
- 4 People sometimes warn us about “cheap grace.” Yet, there's no such thing. Grace isn't cheap—it's free! What's cheap is when people, in claiming that grace, try to use it as an excuse to sin. What examples of that deception can be seen in the Christian world? Or even in our own church?

**Summary:** God is a God of justice, and justice demands judgment. God is also a God of grace. How crucial that we, as Seventh-day Adventist Christians proclaiming the three angels' messages, understand both these divine truths and what they reveal to us about our God.

# The Stolen Cow

by JACQUE THERMIL

Roseline lives in a village in northwestern Haiti. She felt rich, for she owned three cows. But she also felt grateful to God for her wealth and had dedicated one of her cows to God. Now the cow was about to give birth, and Roseline would give the calf to the Lord.

One day after finishing her morning devotions, Roseline went to tend to her cows. But her dedicated cow was missing. She walked up and down the path, calling to the cow, but there was no response. She realized that the cow hadn't wandered off to find a lush stand of grass; it had been stolen.

Roseline started out to town to report the theft to the mayor's office. On the way she stopped at her pastor's home and told him that her cow had been stolen. "I'm not afraid," she told the pastor, "because this cow and its calf are dedicated to God. Nothing will happen to them that God doesn't wish. But I pray that the thief will bring the cow back because she belongs to God."

The pastor smiled at Roseline's faith and promised to pray for the cow and its calf. Then Roseline continued on to the mayor's office to report the missing cow and to ask that if someone returned a cow to let her know, for it was hers. Roseline never doubted that the cow would return home before her calf was born.

The next day Roseline again walked down the path to the pastor's house. "God's cow has come home!" she said excitedly.

"What happened?" the pastor asked, curious.

"The thief himself brought back the cow," Roseline responded. "He told me that every time he looked at the cow he was troubled. He sensed that there was something about this cow, and that made him uncomfortable, but he didn't know what it was. Finally, he couldn't stand it any longer and brought the cow back to me! He even apologized for taking her." Then Roseline hurried on to town to report to the mayor that God had sent her cow home safely.

Two months later, when the calf was born, Roseline gave it to God. She cared for it until it was old enough to leave its mother, and then she sold the calf and gave the money to the Investment offering.

A portion of Investment offerings helps to start new work and supports work in large cities around the world. Thank you for giving your mission and Investment offerings.

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