

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?

Satan succeeded in bringing sin into the world, changing everything as a result. Immediately, though, the Lord entered, calling out to Adam and Eve, "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.*

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.*)

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?

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?

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?

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:

- ❶ 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?
- ❷ 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?
- ❸ 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?
- ❹ 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 it is 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 Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Ecclesiastes 12:14*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Explain the ways in which the twin aspects of God’s character—mercy and justice as illustrated in His acts of grace and judgment—work together from Genesis to Revelation.

Feel: Sense the beauty, balance, and overreaching power of a gospel that both eradicates sin through judgment and saves the penitent believer through grace.

Do: Take hold of the offered gift of grace that delivers the believer from the condemnation that otherwise would fall on us as sinners.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: God’s Grace in Action

A How has God offered deliverance, even while passing judgment on the guilty, in such stories as the Fall and the Flood?

B How does the third angel’s message speak of both the grace and judgment?

II. Feel: The Beauty of Mercy and Justice

A How does a believer escape both the extremes of cheap grace and the terrors of a vengeful judgment?

B Why is a rainbow a good illustration of the beauty and power of mercy and justice working hand in hand?

III. Do: Grace for the Condemned

A Because we all have sinned and deserve death, what is our only hope? How do we obtain grace?

B What joy can we find in the judgment of God?

► **Summary:** Judgment for our sins condemns us to die. Yet, if we accept Christ’s suffering on our behalf, God gives us the life that Christ deserves. This substitution is the grace that delivers us from condemnation and death.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Because of the entrance of sin, God responded with both judgment and grace. Judgment is required for justice to be met, but for those who believe in Christ’s sacrifice on their behalf, mercy provides the grace that restores us to union with God.

Just for Teachers: Use this opening myth to help your class to compare and contrast the origins story in the Bible with this version, which passed down through the Kono culture:

Opening Story: “In the beginning there was darkness. And in it lived Death, called Sa, with his wife and daughter. The three of them were all that was.

“There was nowhere for them to live comfortably, so Sa started it. He used his magic power, and he made an endless mud sea. In this mud place, Sa built his house.

“After that, the god Alatangana came to visit Sa. He found Sa’s house dirty and dark. Alatangana thought Sa should do better than that, and he said so.

“‘Nothing can live in such a place,’ the god told Sa. ‘This house needs fixing up. Everything is too dark.’

“So Alatangana thought he’d better take things in hand. He made the mud solid. We know it now as Earth. ‘The earth feels sad,’ the god said. ‘I will make plants and animals to live on it.’ So he did.”—Virginia Hamilton, *In the Beginning: Creation Stories From Around the World* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1988), p. 15.

The story goes on to relate how the god Alatangana eventually eloped with Sa’s daughter without Sa’s permission and had a large family of both black and white children. Sa punished the family by causing all the children to speak different languages so that they couldn’t understand each other. In addition, Sa would occasionally take a child in death as an offering.

Consider This: What aspects of judgment are found in the story? Where is grace found in this story, if at all? What are some critical differences between the Kono origin story and the biblical version of Creation? How are we blessed by having God’s Word as our origin story?

► STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Use this time to study the relationship between judgment and grace as God has used them to meet the human need for both justice and mercy.

Bible Commentary

I. The Origin of Judgment and Grace *(Review Genesis 3 with your class.)*

There were immediate consequences to Adam’s and Eve’s disobedience at the tree of good and evil; they realized they were naked, and they felt afraid and guilty. Consequences are one form of judgment, but a court hearing came not long after. In the cool of the day, God visited Adam and Eve and, through a series of questions, got to the bottom of what had happened. And then God convened judgment.

Although Adam and Eve had sinned, Satan was the first to receive the sentence of judgment: a death sentence, eternal annihilation for the one who had originated and perpetrated sin on this planet. But that death sentence was also a promise of the demise of evil through the efficacies of the Seed. Much of this work has been done, although we are still waiting for the complete fulfillment of that promise.

This wasn’t the origin of grace or judgment, however. Examine Revelation 13:8; Ephesians 1:4, 11, 12; and Matthew 25:34. God had a plan in place even before Creation and the Fall; judgment and grace were already in operation. “The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (*Rev. 13:8, NKJV*) took on Himself the consequences of sin and the judgment that should have fallen on us in order that we might have our names written in the Book of Life. It is a long-term plan of such mystery, complexity, and depth that even the angels have been amazed as different events have unfolded.

Consider This: List the promises and provisions for God’s people that were laid down at, or before, the foundations of the earth, as described in Revelation 13:8; Ephesians 1:4, 11, 12; and Matthew 25:34. What do these provisions tell us about the nature of God?

II. Judgment, Grace, and Catastrophe *(Review Genesis 6–8 with your class.)*

The Flood was the result of judgment. Yet, grace in the form of Noah’s

long pleading, and the provision of the ark, mediated this catastrophe. When God visited the earth again, this time to see the tower of Babel, He brought judgment (*see Gen. 11:1–9*). The origin story from the Kono people of Guinea has a shadow of memory about this. The city of Babel was established by men who were determined to act independently of God, and, unchecked, they would have destroyed the moral sensibilities of the young world. However, God listened to the righteous of the city who cried out for God’s intervention. He came down to see the city and destroyed the tower. “In mercy to the world He defeated the purpose of the tower builders and overthrew the memorial of their daring. In mercy He confounded their speech, thus putting a check on their purposes of rebellion.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 123.

Consider This: Examine the story of Jonah for similar patterns of judgment and mercy. In this case, God visited mercy on the city by not bringing about the predicted catastrophe. Why?

III. The Father’s Grace, The Father’s Judgment (*Review Ephesians 1, 2, 3 with your class.*)

When we view the manner in which God met the horrors of sin, we glimpse a better picture of who He is. In Ephesians 1, as Paul tries to explain the Father’s role in this whole business of salvation, he pulls out superlative after superlative in his attempt to describe His goodness. Paul knows that it is the Father who blesses us with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Because of this, Paul offers “praise of his glorious grace” (*vs. 6, NIV*). He speaks of “the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us” (*vss. 7, 8, NIV*), the “riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe” (*vss. 18, 19, NIV*).

Continuing in chapter 2, Paul refers to the “incomparable riches of [the Father’s] grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus” (*vs. 7, NIV*). In chapter 3, Paul kneels in prayer to the Father, asking that “out of his glorious riches” (*vs. 16, NIV*) He will send the Spirit in power, that we might understand how wide, long, high, and deep Christ’s love is and so be filled with the fullness of God. The Father is so able to do “immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine” (*vs. 20, NIV*). He loves to bless us. He *lavishes* us with His riches, His power, and His grace. He takes pleasure in doing all this for us because He loves us. It was because He loves us that He sent the greatest gift of all, His only begotten Son, to die for us.

All the superlatives we can muster are not adequate to describe the tenderness, the compassion, the loving kindness of the Father, expressed in the riches of His grace to us and poured out through the gift of His Son Jesus. In the giving of this gift, He broke His own heart so that we might be saved.

Christ's heart, too, was broken. It took a consequence far greater than we could ever imagine (much less bear) to answer the just requirements of the beautiful and righteous law, which is the foundation of God's character and the universe. It took God Himself to bear the consequence of sin for us. It was God's grace, and only God's grace, that could answer to God's judgment which was called forth by the horrific effects of sin. And it is the riches of God's grace, lavished on those who believe, that can fill us with the fullness of God Himself. What can we do but praise Him and give Him glory?

Consider This: Did God show mercy to Christ on the cross? Explain your answer.

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Just for Teachers: Discuss this question to help your class make a personal application of the lesson.

Life Application: If you are a parent, what examples from your child-rearing experiences illustrate the importance of consequences and just judgment, tempered by grace? Or perhaps you are in a position of authority in your field of employment, responsible for supervising your co-workers? In any of these situations in which judgment or discipline was required, have you had to take upon yourself the consequences earned by the child or coworker? How does this experience correlate with, and deepen your appreciation for, that which Christ did for us on the cross?

► **STEP 4**—Create

Just for Teachers: Suggest the following activities to your students to do during the week.

① Write a poem expressing joy and praise to God for the beauty of His judgments and the blessings of His grace.

② A rainbow is a symbol of the blending of God's justice and mercy, and one surrounds His throne. Design a piece of art for your kitchen window that reminds you of this aspect of God's character.
