

## The Judgment and the Grace of God



We should not read about the judgments against sin in the Old Testament, which seem so harsh to us today, as though they do not pertain to us. They undoubtedly do. Those principles of divine wrath for wrongdoing are a part of the divine nature today. Mercy and grace have muted the sound of wrath, but it is there just as certainly as there is a God who never changes.

The Old Testament emphasized the hard penalties for sinning while, at the same time, it did not overlook the grace of God. The provisions in the Old Testament for sacrifices designed to appease an angry Jehovah were signal evidence of the love and grace that are an integral part of God.

The New Testament emphasizes mercy and grace while, at the same time, it does not overlook wrath and judgment as evidenced by the fate of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 1.5-11). The wrath poured upon the lying head of Ananias and his wife Sapphira came in the midst of a rejoicing, thriving Church: It is a sobering

fact of our relationship with God that God is the same in every age. Love, mercy and grace and divine wrath come in the same package – they are part of the essence of God. We of the New Covenant, in which grace and love and mercy are predominant themes, need to walk carefully to avoid abusing the same grace, love, and mercy of God.

It is not that we have to be fearful each moment lest God strike us with a thunderbolt for making mistakes. No, the blood of Jesus covers all our sins. We gather from the Scriptures that only a committed denial of the faith by persons who have been believers will bring such an extremity upon them. The term, "committed denial of the faith," is used here to distinguish such an action from the occasional lapse of conduct (whether it is called "sin" or not) by one who is still committed to Christ. The incidental sin is still sin in all its repulsiveness, but it is covered by the same blood of Jesus that covered all our sins in the beginning of our walk with the Lord. The committed denial arises from a continued stubborn series of disobediences and a lack of repentance for them.

It appears, from the summary judgment imposed on them, that Ananias and Sapphira were committed to their perversity. One can expect certain things from the world: the world has never loved God or His bride the Church. On the other hand, there are particular expectations one has concerning one's own brother and sister. When these expectations are dashed, as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, it can have a very demoralizing effect on the local church within

which it happens. Such tragedies do not make the members of the congregation gravitate toward the world necessarily, but they leave grievous scars.

We can imagine how this tragic tale unfolded: Ananias and Sapphira wanted to be a part of the intimate group of believers in Jerusalem. It is possible that they originally started on their Christian walk with high hopes for the future. Somewhere along the line, though, they lost the commitment to sacrifice so necessary to the Christian walk. They desired the intimacy of Christian fellowship without the giving of everything (self and possessions) that goes with it. Owning property, they sold it as the other Christians in Jerusalem had done. But contrary to what the others had done, Ananias and Sapphira schemed to keep a portion of the proceeds for themselves. As Peter would tell them later, they did not have to sell the property at all, nor did they have to give the proceeds to the church after selling it. The core of the problem was that they wanted to be counted a part of the dedicated membership of the church that God was so marvelously blessing. They wanted it without the sacrifice it entailed, and they felt a twisted sort of compulsion to do what they did. It was not worth the price they would have to pay. They would neither get the intimate fellowship with the saints that they wanted nor would they live to repent of their sin.

If they had failed to do what the others had done, they would still have been born-again saints (if they had truly been born again) and God would have blessed them also. It is true that they would not have known the extreme closeness the others felt who had literally sold all and given all to the Church. But their decision to sell or not to sell would not have affected their salvation. God did not require such a practice. It began simply as a spontaneous outpouring of love and gratitude from the hearts of the new converts. They were thankful for the great things God was doing in the midst of His people.

Ananias and Sapphira did not have the

spontaneity of love that the rest of the saints had and which comes only to those who are committed to Christ. It is difficult to see, though, why anyone who is not sincere would want to associate with people who are at odds with the world. Life is difficult enough without taking on more stress. This Way is not always the most convenient or natural way to live, and being called Christian entails more estrangement from the world than the insincere person wants to inflict on himself. The hypocrite's motivation is at best an obscure one.

Whatever their motivation, the two sold their possessions and Ananias brought part of the proceeds to Peter. He was alleging in his action that he was giving all as the others had done. Peter, whom the Holy Spirit apprised of the deception, confronted Ananias with his trickery. Peter added, "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it [the money] not at your disposal?" Acts 5:4 (RSV).

Peter then pronounced what turned out to be Ananias' death sentence: "You have not lied to men but to God"! and Ananias fell down dead at Peter's feet.

A few hours later Sapphira, not aware of her husband's fate, came before Peter with her lie neatly rehearsed beforehand. Peter asked her if she had sold the land for so much and she assented, sealing her doom also.

Peter was like an



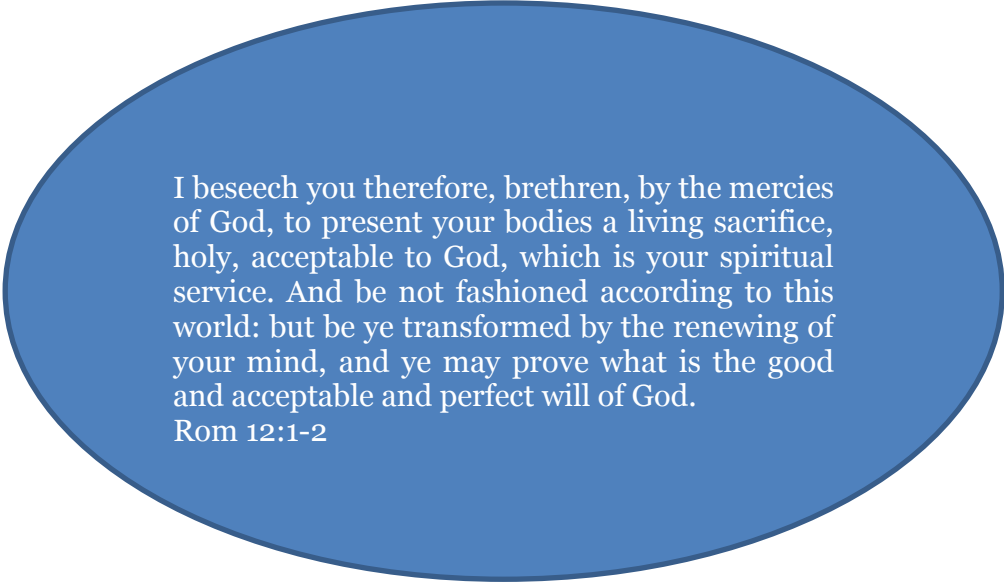
avenging spirit

from the Lord. "Why have you agreed to test the Lord's Spirit?" he asked sharply, and then issued judgment against her: "Those who buried your husband are just now returning and they will carry you out."

Sapphira died instantly and the young men took her out and buried her with her husband. The couple had been partners in their connivance and they were now partners in their damnation.

This incident has to make anyone who reads it to wonder. Where was the grace of God in this situation? If God would strike down everyone who committed a sin after they were once saved, there would remain only those who were newly saved. It is not likely that any believer lives a life completely devoid of sin for a matter of years or months or even weeks. This does not deny the power of God; it merely recognizes human frailty and ignorance of God's full will. At the same time it takes note of the grace of God who covers our sins with the blood of Jesus Christ.

We must also take into account possible unknown factors in this scene: What were Ananias and Sapphira's previous dealings with God? How had God dealt with them, possibly warning them against what they intended to do? Had they, by chance, hardened their hearts against the Lord in prior transgressions and had in the end broken over the final barrier that grace had erected before them? These are unknown factors and we simply have to accept that God is indeed a gracious Savior and a just Judge. The whole account should make us take to heart the warning that is implicit in the incident. It certainly was not lost on the saints in Jerusalem for "great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things." (Acts 5:11)



I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service. And be not fashioned according to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, and ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.  
Rom 12:1-2



**By His Grace**

**From a life full of sin to God's Holy Way,  
By His grace,  
I have come sorely scarred to the light of day,  
By His Grace.**

**Headstrong and willful and lost in sin,  
Boastful without, full of fear within,  
God's love enraptured me and took me in –  
By His grace.**

**There's a peace deep within I cannot explain –  
By His grace.**

**It persists in my heart despite all my pain,  
By His grace.**

**Though all unworthy, I'm lost in His love,  
Comforted, strengthened and helped from  
above,  
Stay ever with me, O heav'nly Dove!  
By His grace.**