

Fearful Judgment

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Thou, even thou, art to be feared: and who may stand in thy sight when once thou art angry? Thou didst cause judgment to be heard from heaven; the earth feared, and was still, When God arose to judgment, to save all the meek of the earth. Selah.? (Ps 76:7-9)

We have reviewed the fear of consequences in earlier chapters. The above passage deals directly with that question. Many professing Christians stereotype God so fully as a benevolent grandfather that they reject any sense of fear whatever toward Him. This idea is gravely flawed and void of Biblical support. Rest assured, if your name was Ananias or Sapphira, when Peter spoke to you, you would have good reason to fear (Ac 5). Further, Peter surfaces legitimate fear in the context of judgment in the house of God (1Pe 4:17). The writer of Hebrews specifically states, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb 10:31). Conduct that fails to follow God's divine model set forth in Scripture has every reason for fear. God's judgments are as fearful as His goodness is gracious. The context of Ac 5 does not address whether Ananias and Sapphira were saved or not, only that they were numbered with the church in Jerusalem. Regeneration is not the point of this lesson; the danger of lying to God is the leading issue. In the other two verses the context specifically deals with regenerate elect who are not living according to God's Word.

How do you know if you are doing what God wants you to do? I generally reject any form of alleged "revelation" as incapable of validation and therefore not sufficient as a basis for living. However, God has revealed His will to us in Scripture. Paul affirms that "all scripture" comes from God, so personal as to be breathed by Him, and that Scripture is intended to instruct the "man of God" "unto all good works" (2Ti 3:16). Therefore, we should not judge our conduct on the basis of how we "feel" or what we think to be right or wrong. "Let your conscience be your guide" can be either reliable or incredibly deceptive, depending on how the conscience has been trained. Outside of Scripture every rule, every authority must be tested by the rule of Scripture. The historical Baptist principle—and the correct Biblical principle—is that Scripture and Scripture alone is to be the Christian's *only* rule of faith and conduct.

Thou, even thou, art to be feared: and who may stand in thy sight when once thou art angry? Several years ago a television commercial concluded with the quip, "You mustn't fool with Mother Nature." I haven't fully identified "Mother Nature," but I clearly perceive the God of Scripture as wholly serious about His teachings and His uncompromising commandments that we are to obey. A number of years back I was preaching a special meeting at a church in a different region of the country. A young seminary student in the community attended the meeting. During one of the intermissions the pastor and I visited with this young man. One of his questions was "What is your epistemology?" "Epistemology" refers to our source of authority or knowledge. As respectful as we should be toward our ancestors in the faith, faithful men on whose historical and ideological shoulders we stand, we are not to search out answers and authority for what we believe and what we do from them. Scripture and Scripture alone must be our only true "epistemology."

The Old Testament documents multiple examples in which God's own people drove Him to anger by their moral and idolatrous sins. Though Ac 5 does not specifically address the eternal state of Ananias and Sapphira, one could argue as effectively for as against their salvation. They were numbered with the Jerusalem church in a season when such identity endangered their lives. Would you be so bold in your faith if your life possibly hung in the balance? For this reason I will not limit the fear of this passage to unsaved people. Rather I believe that it primarily addresses the fact, often repeated in Scripture, in history, and in our personal experiences and observations, that regenerate children of God

do at times so sin as to provoke God to anger. When we engage in such conduct, we should rightly fear the divine reaction to our sins.

In observing the conduct of professing Christians I get a distinct impression that many who profess faith in Christ view a significant number of New Testament *commandments* as casually optional in their personal lives. I'll list just a few areas where this callous indifference to Scripture frequently appears.

Our finances. How do we determine how much to give to the church of our membership and to other church-related activities? Or do we ignore Scripture and its direct commandments regarding giving, living above our means and plunging ourselves so hopelessly in debt that we cannot give at all? What does Scripture teach regarding our giving? Various New Testament passages use terms such as “on the first day of the week” (a distinct indication that we budget our giving before other spending, not from the leftovers, if any), “as God has prospered” (attributing all of our income to God’s goodness and affirming the foundation that we are to give Him and His church some of it back), “as every man purposeth in his heart” (affirming that giving is intentional, thoughtful, and regular).

Church attendance. Christian magazines abound with comical scenarios about the attitude of many folks toward church attendance. One such story depicts the scenario at a sparsely attended Sunday morning worship service. The pastor announces the multitude of phone calls he received on Saturday from various members of the congregation complaining of their various illnesses, obligations, and “legitimate” reasons for not attending church on Sunday morning. On Sunday afternoon the pastor drives through the community to visit an older sick member of his congregation. He is amazed and praises God upon seeing every person who had phoned him on Saturday, so ill or otherwise impaired from attending church, but he now sees them busily shopping, attending sporting events, and attending to their professional careers on Sunday afternoon. He praises God for miraculous healing. My mother-in-law at times exhibited a rather negative “The glass is half empty” kind attitude. In her later years, when she was able to attend church, my wife and I would pick her up at the retirement apartment complex and take her with us to church. On several occasions as we drove into the church parking lot with more empty slots than parked cars, she would react, “Oh, it’s just what I expected. No one is here today.” Christians who identify themselves with a church are taught in Scripture not to “forsake the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is” (Heb 10:25). Even in the first century the inspired writer confronts the tendency of some to neglect faithful church attendance.

The practice of admonishing negligent believers—and its counterpart, the highly offended and prideful attitude of those who are admonished. Matthew 18, Galatians 6, and any number of other passages in the New Testament command us to confront and to encourage negligent believers. I must confess that at times I’ve allowed myself to avoid confrontation with the excuse that the person whom I thought to need the exhortation had shown excessive pride when others tried to admonish them, so why should I bother? I was wrong. If Scripture teaches us to confront and to admonish those who are delinquent in their Biblical duty, we should practice it. We should carefully avoid any appearance of pride in our methods, but we have no Biblical basis to simply ignore Scripture and refuse to confront those who are neglecting their Biblical obligations. And if someone approaches us with confrontation and admonition, we should carefully consider their words and attempt to improve our obedience, not strike out at them in hurt pride for their exhortation. What is the “bottom line” of this passage? If we choose to ignore, neglect, or disobey Scripture, we should prepare for severe divine judgments. We have good reason to fear the judgments of God against our sins.