

Living By Faith And God's Justice

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II Corinthians 5:7 states with crystalline clarity our Christian responsibility: "For we walk by faith, not by sight." In this series of articles on living by faith, we have covered three of five spiritual elements *continuously* necessary to our thinking to accomplish this responsibility. As we are seeing, doing so involves interesting complexities. Living by faith is not easy because, just as gravity pulls us toward the earth, human nature pulls us toward living by sight. Living by sight is natural, but living by faith is unnatural—so unnatural that God must jump-start it graciously and miraculously by calling us. By comparison, simply believing that a Creator God exists is easy. Living by faith day by day is no easy matter.

In relation to God, those of unbelief live by sight. Hebrews 3:12, 17-19 provides us with evidence of this fact:

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God. . . . Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.

The Israelites in the wilderness could not live by faith, despite having strong visual evidence of God's nearness to them daily. For example, He killed the firstborn of Egypt; He divided the sea; He provided water from a rock when necessary. *Every day* for forty years, He witnessed to His presence by providing manna and the cloud over the Tabernacle! On occasion, because of their unbelief, He triggered an earthquake or caused poisonous snakes to invade the camp, sending many to their deaths. He did much more, but these examples make the point: Those who lived by sight fell by the wayside.

We have now covered three interlocking spiritual realities necessary for living life by faith: God's sovereignty, man's pride, and man's humility. Two more are necessary ingredients: God's justice and His grace. If this package of spiritual realities is rightly discerned and is in good order in the foundation of our beliefs, they serve as constant prods to move our hearts toward making conscious and careful judgments to trust Him. This article expounds God's sense of justice to complement this mix of vital spiritual realities.

A Reality of God's Character

The apostle Paul writes in Romans 11:19-22:

You will say then, "Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in." Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.

Paul directs this passage toward Gentiles as part of an admonition he wanted them to consider regarding their calling into the church. We, too, must seriously consider God's goodness and severity. God is not only what we commonly think of as love. His character is perfectly balanced by a sense of justice for all concerned and for His purpose too. To be just is to be fair, evenhanded, and impartial. God will always be fair because even His justice is executed in love and is an act of love.

God is not only supreme in power and authority, but He is also supreme in judgment. His mind pierces through all of the justifications we make to excuse our bad attitudes and conduct as measured against His righteous standard. So, if we desire to live by faith, we must seriously consider His sense of justice because what we may think is a small matter, an event of no great magnitude, may trigger God to react with terrible swiftness and severe consequences that leave us wondering why. Scripture records a number of these sudden, violent reactions.

We must begin by understanding that we do not see the entire picture as God does. The reality of God's justice helps us to perceive three important factors to living by faith: 1) The wages of sin is indeed death (Romans 6:23); 2) we are headed toward death and do not know its time; and 3) God means exactly what He says.

Judgment Is Now on the House of God

Jesus declares an important principle in Luke 12:48: "But he who did not know, yet committed things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more." We need to think about the seriousness of our calling, knowing that human nature contains a strong strain of self-deception. This verse should remind us that because we have been given so much, our judgment will be sterner.

God states in Romans 1:18-20 that mankind is without excuse regarding His existence, but it is easily seen in the immoral conduct committed throughout the world that people are paying little or no attention to their responsibilities to God. As people go about their daily activities, they ignore Him; a relationship with Him is not perceived as a vital, everyday necessity to life.

Some may talk of Him on occasion and even pray, but they are not seriously committed to true devotion to Him. They are neither learning more of His truth nor further broadening and deepening obedience to Him. Besides those folks, some are openly and aggressively antagonistic toward Him and His laws.

However, in the face of these attitudes, we cannot allow ourselves to disregard the fact that God is very serious about His intentions to fulfill His purposes for His creation and most especially in the lives of His children. His purpose has been revealed to us, and we are more responsible than others.

Though by our reckoning of time God's justice often seems long delayed, the prophecies will be fulfilled and His Kingdom established under Jesus Christ. God commands that we must live by faith, so we cannot let down. We must push on in faith.

Focus on Yielding to Him

Proverbs 21:16 contains a solemn warning: "A man who wanders away from the way of understanding will rest in the congregation of the dead." Notice the use of the word "wanders." God's

children do not ordinarily deliberately plan to go astray, but whether they do or do not, regardless of the intention, the result is the same.

Hebrews 2:1-3 provides an illustration in which there is no deliberate intention to sin:

Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him.

The metaphor in "lest we drift away" is of a boat slipping its moorings and drifting away, caught in the currents it was tied against. Paul makes clear that the spiritual drifting is the result of neglecting the priorities set by our calling into the Kingdom of God, just as a boat will drift away if it is not tied securely. Other parts of the book of Hebrews show that neglect becomes a factor when one is not consciously living a *purposely* directed life. The epistle's recipients were neglectfully drifting through life.

Hebrews 5:11-14 shows us the result:

. . . of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

These people had become "dull of hearing" and apparently were rapidly regressing toward unconversion. Neglect is particularly spiritually dangerous. Through neglect, they were seriously drifting into a lack of faith deep enough to have to relearn the fundamentals of this way of life. When dullness of hearing is tied to Romans 10:17—"faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"—we can understand that, if one does not hear correctly, motivation to live by faith greatly diminishes.

Hebrews was written to encourage a congregation of neglectful and drifting people to repent, to get back on track toward the Kingdom. Considering their dullness of hearing, the book of Proverbs provides what might be a shocking reality, one we hope we will not have to face if we will repent.

Now therefore, listen to me, my children, for blessed are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not disdain it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoever finds me finds life, and obtains favor from the Lord; but he who sins against me wrongs his own soul; all those who hate me love death. (Proverbs 8:32-36)

Bluntly stated, Wisdom's sage and exhortative counsel is, "Listen carefully and apply what I tell you diligently. If you do not, but instead live a life of sin, then the conclusion of the matter is that, in reality, you love death rather than life." Since our calling, have we ever pictured ourselves as loving death? Those who do not consciously and purposefully direct their lives by faith toward obedience to God in reality love death!

A Serious Lapse of Judgment

Jesus says in Revelation 3:16-18:

So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, "I am rich and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing"—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.

The drifting of the Laodicean happens so subtly that he is unaware of the decline of his spiritual perception and vigor. What happens when a person begins drifting is that human nature deceives him to judge two things wrongly: 1) the quality of his own spirituality and therefore, 2) the use of his time.

Consider the process of the Laodicean's decline: Does he stop to consider himself as loving death? On the contrary, his nature is selling him on what it calls "enjoying life." However, the reality is that because he enjoys it so much, he thinks that he is fine the way he is. He, though, is guilty of a very serious sin: presumption. This is a sin in which ignorance frequently plays only a small part. When someone is presumptuous, knowledge of what is right is usually available, but he does not think his intent and conduct through to a right conclusion.

On the other hand, carelessness plays a large role in presumption. The Laodiceans should have known better than what their actions reveal. Their lackadaisical approach to spiritual matters, to their Savior who died for them, has earned His stinging rebuke.

Leviticus 4:2 zeroes in on this sin, revealing that it may be more serious than one might suppose. The word "unintentionally" includes more than simply lack of intention, as when a person sins and says, "I really didn't mean it." That is not wrong, but it misses some of the point because that conclusion is shallow and broad. In spite of the sinner's feelings about his intent as he actually committed the act, the term "sin" still appears in God's charge, and he continues to turn aside, wander, err, make a mistake, miss the mark, and go off the path. Though unintentional, the act is still a sin.

Consider the possible effects of such a sin. How many deaths have occurred where a person did something seriously wrong yet claims, "I didn't mean for that to happen"? What could happen if someone is cruising along, not concentrating on his driving, and drifts into oncoming traffic, smashing into another car and killing its occupants? How many people have been killed because a driver's attention was diverted by a cell phone? Just because a sin is unintentional does not mean it is not serious. Such a sin is often one of careless, impatient, lackadaisical neglect. It is the ignoring of a higher priority.

It is in reality often a sin of presumption, an ignoring of God and His law. It includes sins done with a degree of consciousness, a level of awareness of what one's responsibilities are. Even though not arrogantly and deliberately done, they are in reality done willingly.

These can be quite serious. Exodus 20:7, the third commandment, reads, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in

vain." Because we have been baptized and have received God's Spirit, we have taken on the name "Christian." We are children of God, followers of Christ, and as such, we bear the Family name, an honor not lightly bestowed. Recall again that to whom much is given, the more shall be required.

God warns that we must not bear that holy name carelessly, that is, to no good purpose. He will not hold us guiltless. That name must be borne responsibly in dignified honor to Him, to His Family, and to its operations and purposes. Can we afford to be presumptuously negligent in this privileged responsibility? It is right here that knowledge of God's justice should come to a Christian's mind. It does this because the Christian "sees" God—not literally, of course, but spiritually, in his mind's eye, because he knows Him.

God Means What He Says

To grasp the concept of justice more fully, we need to understand three related Hebrew words that appear in the biblical text 363 times. Their common root is *tsadaq*, which originally meant "to be stiff or straight." However, in a moral context, it means "to be or to make right." These three words are translated into English as "just," "righteous," "righteousness," "justify," "justice," and "cleansed," depending on the context. In regard to conduct, *tsadaq* indicates "conforming to a standard." A just or righteous person does not deviate from a moral standard. In a legal circumstance, a judgment is an opinion or decision made on the basis of a standard, usually existing laws. In a Bible context, the standard is God Himself or His law as revealed.

Psalms 11:4-7 provides us with an essential truth about God's governance and judging of His creation:

The Lord is in His holy temple, the Lord's throne is in heaven; His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men. The Lord tests the righteous, but the wicked and the one who loves violence His soul hates. Upon the wicked He will rain coals, fire and brimstone and a burning wind; this shall be the portion of their cup. For the Lord is righteous, He loves righteousness; His countenance beholds the upright.

A major point of instruction in this brief psalm is that, though it may seem to men as if God has gone off somewhere and is not paying attention, He is indeed very aware and patiently timing His interventions. Many evil people believe that God exists and created all things, but their belief is shallow. He is not part of their choices of conduct, so they live assuming that He is not personally managing His creation. Life goes on, they believe, without His involvement.

This psalm refutes that, as do many other passages. It is a foolish, careless, and presumptuous basis for life's choices. We will examine a few examples of people who carelessly thought this way, and we will see evidence of how God can justly act if He so chooses. Our first example is in Leviticus 10: 1-7:

Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the Lord, which *He had not commanded them*. So fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord spoke, saying: 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified.'" So Aaron held his peace.

Then Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, "Come near, carry your brethren from before the sanctuary out of the camp." So they went near and carried them by their tunics out of the camp, as Moses had said. And Moses said to Aaron, and to Eleazar and Ithamar, his sons, "Do not uncover your heads nor tear your clothes, lest you die, and wrath come upon all the people. But let your brethren, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning which the Lord has kindled. You shall not go out from the door of the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die, for the anointing oil of the Lord is upon you." And they did according to the word of Moses. (Emphasis ours throughout.)

Surely these men did not deliberately intend to sin. However, notice how quickly God's sense of justice reacted, striking these men dead in their tracks and burning them to cinders. Obviously, they either did or failed to do something far more serious than ever entered their minds. Is not God's reaction a vivid warning, especially to those who come near Him? Are we not among those who come near Him?

Look at the evidence more closely and observe God's sense of justice. First, these men were the sons of Aaron, and Moses was their uncle. One would think that, if anybody among those two to three million Israelites had a close relationship with God, that family did. So one might think there may have been some leeway in God's judgment, but there was not! God reacted swiftly and violently.

Second, the charge against them was not because they consorted with prostitutes. No human sacrifices were planned or made. The charge was that they used "profane" (NKJV) or "strange" (KJV) fire.

But we need to look further. Just a few days before this startling event, Exodus 40 reveals the construction of the Tabernacle had been completed and its furniture arranged. Leviticus 1 begins listing the final procedures made for God to dwell in the Tabernacle. In Leviticus 8, the priesthood was consecrated, and in Leviticus 9, they made their first official offering using the Tabernacle and its furniture. Leviticus 9:22-24 says:

Then Aaron lifted his hand toward the people, blessed them, and came down from offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and peace offerings. And Moses and Aaron went into the tabernacle of meeting, and came out and blessed the people. Then the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people, and *fire came out from before the Lord* and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.

This spectacular and serious event shows the offering's acceptance by God.

To this point, all was well, but we must consider a solemn command given by God to the Levites regarding their responsibilities in Leviticus 6:12-13:

And the fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it; it shall not be put out. And the priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and lay the burnt offering in order on it; and he shall burn on it the fat of the peace offerings. *A perpetual fire shall burn on the altar; it shall never go out.*

The altar fire was to be rekindled continually from its own coals, which remained from God's acceptance of the original offering. What was Nadab and Abihu's sin? They used coals from a fire not ignited by God. It was not from His hand and therefore was foreign fire.

If we read between the lines here, we can easily see that Aaron was shocked. He went right to the top of human leadership to get this straightened out, and Moses gave him God's answer: Do not mourn. Do not show any agreement with Nadab and Abihu. Do not show any disagreement with God's judgment.

Why? God's judgments are never wrong. Nadab and Abihu got what they deserved. God saw every aspect of their act as it unfolded. They had added or subtracted to what God commanded and died. They had tried to get by with what they carnally felt was acceptable.

The instruction is clear: Among those consecrated by God to serve Him and His family, His instructions must be explicitly followed. They totally disregarded what He had commanded in Leviticus 6:12-13. There is no ambiguity in the instructions. They had been completely and adequately informed. Each step and each instrument in the process had been designed to teach certain spiritual concepts. They had thought that common fire was good enough, but in their careless, presumptuous neglect, they had blatantly twisted God's Word.

This incident vividly illustrates that the wages of sin is death. Leviticus 10:3 says Aaron held his peace; he knew the judgment was correct. It was a shocking demonstration, but we can be certain that, because God is love and is supremely sovereign in His judgment, His every decision will be as correct as His judgment of Nadab and Abihu, since He Himself is the standard.

God is not a holy terror lying in wait for us to do something wrong, but He provides us examples such as this and several others of what He can do in response to sin. When He responds like this, He is fully justified. He wants us to consider His justice so that we will be better prepared to evaluate our calling properly and then live by faith.

God's Goodness and Severity

Consider again a factor of God's judgment in Romans 11:22: "Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off." Paul admonishes us to consider both God's goodness and severity. Both of these characteristics are part of what He is, and therefore we must respect both.

We can make the contrast between them very sharp: Until Adam and Eve sinned, they received all goodness from God. After their sin, it appears that His severity hit them immediately; they were ushered out of the Garden.

In Genesis 4, Cain sinned by killing Abel. At first, Cain received goodness from God in that he was permitted to live, but he also received severity in that he had to live as a marked vagabond.

In these two early examples, both sides of God's judgment appear, and a pattern has become especially clear: Severity results because of sin.

Whether we are immediately aware of it is not the issue. For instance, when Adam and Eve sinned, their decline into death began immediately, regardless of whether they were physically aware of any

deterioration of their health. Cain immediately became a vagabond separated from his family roots. The only real difference between the carrying out of the death penalty between Adam and Eve and Nadab and Abihu is the effect God desired to create by His immediate, shocking display of severity.

We who draw near to God must know that the God we serve is to be served as a holy God—especially because He is a holy God. He permitted no opportunity for them to repent because they should have known better. The wages of sin is always death.

In the days of Noah, the goodness of God spared only eight souls, but His severity terrifyingly destroyed the remainder of humanity. In a matter of a few days, perhaps billions of people, even innocent unborn and newborn babies, died because of sin.

Following King Saul's paranoia-driven reign, God showed His goodness to Israel by raising up David, a man after His own heart, to rule over Israel. Yet, then David committed a disastrous double sin by entering into adultery with Bathsheba and deliberately bringing about the death of the loyal Uriah. God mercifully forgave the sins, but that does not mean there was no painful punishment laid on David and his family. God's severity against David and his family was hard and long. First, the son born of that illicit union died shortly after its birth. Later, David's firstborn son, Amnon, raped his own half-sister, Tamar. Tamar's brother, Absalom, seeking revenge, killed Amnon and fled from David, not seeing him for two years.

Then Absalom revolted against David in his desire to take over the throne. Absalom arrogantly proceeded to defile David's concubines in the sight of all Israel. Several thousand were killed in this revolt, and eventually, Absalom himself was killed by Joab. The family's pain did not stop even then, washing over into Solomon's reign when he put Adonijah to death because he sought political power by asking for Abishag's hand in marriage.

David was a man of blood, as God Himself mentions, but his children carried a moral cancer until death stopped them. Have we ever noticed how much deceit and illicit sex was involved in David's family's sins? God was not present in that family's life as He had once been. He could have stepped in at any time and stopped the holocaust ripping through David's family, but He did not. Living as they did, despite being the progeny of a man God greatly loved, they felt the severity of His judgments.

Deeply consider how long God's severity lasted! He did not simply let David off the hook. He had been chosen to draw near to God. Much was required of him.

We Must Take Note

All that it took to allow these characteristics to blossom into hateful violence right within the family was for God to withhold His spiritual blessings. Nadab, Abihu, Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah all received what they deserved.

It is interesting to note that a striking display of God's justice is recorded at the outset of important steps in God's plan. The first occurred as the Tabernacle and its operations for the worship of God began, and Nadab and Abihu died. The second happened when Israel entered the Promised Land, and Achan died for his thievery. The third event resulted in Uzzah's sudden death as the ark was wrongly transported just as David's kingship blossomed in great peace and prosperity. The fourth transpired as the Christian church began, when God struck Ananias and Sapphira dead for their deceit. These

admonishments seem planned as shocking reminders for us not to forget that God's justice remains active.

Paul writes in Romans 11:33: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!" This fervent outburst of praise follows soon after his admonition about the goodness and severity of God in verse 22. We have grown up in a very permissive culture, making us almost totally unfamiliar with the tough love God uses because He loves His children so much. Because the stakes are so high, He cannot permit Himself to be permissive.

Revelation 16:5-7 reminds us:

"You are righteous, O Lord, the One who is and who was and who is to be, because You have judged these things. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and You have given them blood to drink. For it is their just due." And I heard another from the altar saying, "Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments."

There is no injustice with God. His justice is never divorced from His righteousness. He never condemns the innocent; He never clears the guilty without repentance; He never punishes with undue severity; He always rewards righteousness. His justice is perfect justice.

He does not require absolutely perfect obedience, or nobody would make it. The blood of Jesus Christ is available to cover us (Revelation 1:5). However, He does not always act with justice because He sometimes acts with mercy. Mercy is not justice, but neither is it injustice, as injustice violates righteousness. Mercy manifests kindness and grace; it does no violence to righteousness.

Those who live by faith must seriously consider God's justice. It constantly reminds us that the wages of sin is death, that sin is disloyalty to God, and that God means what He says. It reminds us of the tremendously precious value of Christ's sacrifice. When we enter into the covenant with God, we are pledging our lives to serve Him in gladness and faithfulness so that He might create us in His image.

Next time, we will delve into the next element, God's grace, which helps to prod us to live continuously by faith. We must know and appreciate His grace without abusing it. His justice is a reality, and so is sin's penalty, but His mercifully given grace overrides both.