

CHAPTER

SIX



Holy Justice

Justice is regarded as the highest
of all virtues, more admirable than
morning star and evening star.

ARISTOTLE

R.C. SPROUL
THE HOLINESS OF GOD

Martin Luther understood how serious the problem is for unjust people to live in the presence of a just and holy God. Just as Luther was a monk of monks, so Paul was a Pharisee of Pharisees. Both were brilliant men, highly educated. It was said of Paul that he was the most educated man in Palestine at the time of his conversion. He had the equivalent of two Ph.D.'s by the time he was twenty-one years old. He also struggled deeply with the law and the question of the justice of God. Luther the monk and Paul the Pharisee both were consumed by the problem of holy justice. They were both students of the Old Testament Law before they became advocates of the gospel.

Whoever reads the Old Testament must struggle with the apparent brutality of God's judgment found there. For many people this is as far as they read. They stumble over the violent passages we call the "hard sayings." Some people see these sayings as sufficient reason to reject Christianity out of hand. These hard sayings seem ample reason to hold the Old Testament God in contempt. Others try to soften the blow by turning the Old Testament into a religious parable or by applying a method of cut and paste, assigning the more brutal passages to the level of primitive myth. Some even go so far as to argue that the Old Testament God is a different God from the New Testament God—a shadowy God with a bad temper,

a kind of demonic deity whose blazing wrath is beneath the dignity of the New Testament God of love.

In this chapter I want to stare the Old Testament God right in the eye. I want to look at the most difficult, most offensive passages we can find in the Old Testament and see if we can make any sense of them. We will look at the swift and sudden judgment that falls on Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron; we will look at God's striking Uzzah dead for touching the ark of the covenant; we will look at the lengthy list of crimes for which God commanded capital punishment; we will look at the slaughter of women and children allegedly done under the orders of God. Be warned. This chapter is not for the weak of stomach or of heart. We will stare into the abyss of the Most Terrible, if you are willing to read along.

Let's look first at Nadab and Abihu. These two men were priests, sons of Aaron, the high priest. God had personally selected Aaron to be the first high priest. Together with Moses, Aaron had led the people of Israel through the wilderness. "Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD" (Lev. 10:1-2). If any people in Israel had a close relationship with God, it was Moses and Aaron. One might expect a little leeway from God in dealing with Aaron's sons. But there was none. For one transgression at the altar, God reacted swiftly and violently, wiping them out on the spot. It was not as if they profaned the altar with prostitutes or offered human sacrifices as did the Molech cult. All Nadab and Abihu did was offer some "strange fire" there. We are not sure exactly what the strange fire was. It sounds as if the situation was merely a question of young priests doing some creative experimenting with the liturgy. A censurable offense, perhaps. But the death penalty? Without the benefit of a trial? Immediate, summary execution?

Throughout the years people have tried to offer a natural explanation for what happened to Nadab and Abihu. Immanuel Velikovsky, scientist friend of Albert Einstein's, was one of those people.

Velikovsky shocked the geological world with his theories that changes in the earth's surface were made suddenly by a catastrophic upheaval caused by a planet or giant comet that came so close to the earth that it reversed the magnetic poles and forced the earth to start spinning in the opposite direction. Imagine a top spinning as fast as it can. Then, instantly, it is made to spin in the opposite direction. If there were water inside the top, what would happen to it? It would become a tidal wave in the opposite direction. Part of Velikovsky's theory suggests that a meteoric shower bombarded the earth that included within its content great volumes of petroleum, filling the fissures on the earth's surface and causing great deposits of oil to form under the earth. (Consider the oil-rich region of the Middle East.)

This theory suggests that Nadab and Abihu found some oil lying around, and they wondered what it was. They decided to see how it worked if it was mixed with the burning substances at the altar. When they put it in the fire, *whoosh*, it ignited and exploded, killing the priests instantly. In a primitive society this would be viewed as a sudden act of judgment by the gods. In Velikovsky's view, the deaths of Nadab and Abihu were accidents, a tragic case of children playing with unknown fire.

The Bible views the story differently. The Bible records the event as a supernatural judgment of God. It may have been enacted through natural means, but it is clear that the death of Nadab and Abihu was no accident. It must be ascribed to the wrath and judgment of God.

How did Aaron view the event? I suppose he was angry and hurt. It was a calamity for Aaron and his remaining family. He had dedicated his entire life to the service of God. His sons were following in his footsteps. He could remember the day of their consecration

and the pride he felt when they were set apart for the priesthood. It was a family matter. What thanks did he get from the God he served? God summarily executed his sons for what appeared to be a minor infraction of the rules of the altar.

Aaron rushed to see Moses and tell him about it. It was as if Aaron were saying, "OK, God, I'm going to tell on you. I'm going straight to Moses. You're going to have to deal with us both on this one." So Aaron went to Moses and pled his case: "Moses then said to Aaron, 'This is what the LORD spoke of when he said: "Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored"' (Lev. 10:3).

Moses gave Aaron the answer of the Lord. He reminded him of the original consecration of the priests. They had been set apart for a sacred task and solemnly charged with the precise requirements of their office. They had the privilege of ministering before a holy God. Each vessel in the tabernacle was made to precise specifications, and each item was sanctified by elaborate measures commanded by God. There was no ambiguity to be found in these commands. With respect to the altar of incense, Aaron and his sons were specifically instructed in the proper procedures. God had spoken: "Do not offer on this altar any other incense or any burnt offering or grain offering, and do not pour a drink offering on it. Once a year Aaron shall make atonement on its horns. This annual atonement must be made with the blood of the atoning sin offering for the generations to come. It is most holy to the LORD" (Exod. 30:9-10).

The instructions had been clear. The altar of incense was declared by God to be "most holy." When Nadab and Abihu offered strange or unauthorized fire on it, they were acting in clear defiance of God. Theirs was an act of blatant rebellion, an inexcusable profaning of the Holy Place. They committed a sin of arrogance, an act of treason against God: They profaned a most holy place.

God's judgment was swift. His explanation to Moses was clear:

"I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored." These were not words of future prophecy or prediction. When God said, "I will," He meant it as a divine command, a command no one dare countermand.

The capstone of this episode is found in the last sentence of Leviticus 10:3: "Aaron remained silent."

What else could Aaron do? The debate was over. The evidence was in, and God had rendered His verdict. The sons of Aaron had been explicitly forbidden from offering such fire. They committed an act of disobedience, and God had lowered the gavel of His justice on them. So Aaron was silent. He held his peace. He could think of no excuse to offer, no protest to make. Like sinners at the Last Judgment, his mouth was stopped.

Here is an example of God's punitive justice, the justice by which He punishes the guilty. Is this punishment cruel and unusual? Does it in fact go beyond the limits of justice and cross the border into injustice?

Built into our concept of justice is the idea that the punishment must fit the crime. If the punishment is more severe than the crime, then an injustice has been committed. The Bible makes it clear that Nadab and Abihu could not plead ignorance as an excuse for their sin. God had made his instructions clear to them. They knew that they were not allowed to offer unauthorized fire on the altar. That they sinned is easy for us to see. But they never dreamed their sin was so serious that it would prompt God to execute them on the spot. Here we meet an example that screams of harshness from the hand of God, of a punishment that is far too cruel and unusual for the crime. Such a measure of punishment not only puzzles us, it staggers us.

How do we square this narrative with what Genesis teaches earlier about the character of God's justice? Genesis asserts that the judge of all the earth *will do right* (Gen. 18:25). The basic assumption of Israel is that God's judgments are always according

to righteousness. His justice is never unfair, never whimsical, never tyrannical. It is impossible for God to be unjust, because his justice is holy.

If we struggle with the story of Nadab and Abihu, we meet even greater difficulty with the story of Uzzah. When David ascended to the kingship of Israel, he moved quickly to consolidate his kingdom. He conferred with his officers and military commanders and decided to bring the ark of the covenant, Israel's most sacred vessel, out of "retirement" and back to a central place. The ark had been captured by the Philistines; and it was said that in that fateful day, the glory had departed from Israel. When the sacred ark was captured, Israel's greatest treasure was stolen and carried off to the pagan temple of Dagon. When the ark was returned, it was placed in safekeeping awaiting the appropriate time for its public restoration to a position of prominence in the midst of the nation. Finally, the hour came, and David wanted the glory back. He said: "Let us bring the ark of our God back to us, for we did not inquire of it during the reign of Saul." The whole assembly agreed to do this, because it seemed right to all the people" (1 Chron. 13:3-4).

The ark was the rallying point for the nation. It was the throne of God, the sacred seat of the Most High. It had been constructed and ornamented by the strict design of God Himself. It was to be housed in the *Sanctus Sanctorum*, the Holy of Holies. The ark was a chest made of acacia wood, overlaid with gold on the inside and outside. It had a gold molding around it. Four gold rings were fastened to its feet so that poles could be inserted through the rings to carry the chest. The poles were also made of acacia wood and overlaid with gold.

The lid of the chest was called an "atonement cover." It was also made of pure gold. Two cherubim made of hammered gold were mounted on each end of the chest, facing each other with their wings spread upward. This was the sacred object that David ordered returned to Jerusalem.

They moved the ark of God from Abinadab's house on a new cart, with Uzzah and Ahio guiding it. David and all the Israelites were celebrating with all their might before God, with songs and with harps, lyres, tambourines, cymbals and trumpets.

When they came to the threshing floor of Kidon, Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark, because the oxen stumbled. The LORD's anger burned against Uzzah, and he struck him down because he had put his hand on the ark. So he died there before God.

Then David was angry because the LORD's wrath had broken out against Uzzah. (1 Chron. 13:7-11)

If God made David angry with this violent outburst of wrath, how much more unsettled does it make a reader who is unskilled in theology? David was a man after God's own heart. Not only was he a masterful king, an accomplished musician, and a champion warrior, but he was also a premier theologian.

Even more than the case of Nadab and Abihu, the execution of Uzzah stirs protests from readers who have been taught that God is a God of love and kindness. The Bible says of God that He is long-suffering and slow to anger. It sure didn't take His anger long to reach the boiling point with Uzzah. Uzzah touched the ark, and *wham!* God exploded in fury.

Again, efforts have been made to soften the harshness of this account by seeking a natural explanation for Uzzah's death. It has been suggested that Uzzah had so much respect for the sacred ark that when he touched it, he was so overcome with fright that he had a heart attack and died on the spot. He was plain scared to death. This explanation absolves God of any responsibility in the matter. The biblical writer's interpretation is merely

an example of primitive superstition sprinkled throughout the Old Testament.

People reach for such explanations not only because our culture has an incurable allergy to all things supernatural but also because the story so offends our sense of justice. Look again at what happened. The ark was being transported by oxcart toward Jerusalem. It was a joyous day of national celebration. The glory was returning to the Holy City. The roads were crowded with people. The gala parade was punctuated by the sounds of the harps, lyres, tambourines, cymbals, and trumpets. Imagine the spectacle: It was like a parade with seventy-six trombones. People danced in the streets.

The oxen suddenly stumbled, and the cart tottered precariously. The chest slid from its mooring and was in danger of falling into the dirt and being sullied by the mud. It was unthinkable that this precious object be desecrated by falling in the dirt.

Surely Uzzah's reaction was instinctive. He did what any pious Jew would do to keep the ark from falling into the mud. He reached out his hand to steady the ark, to protect the holy object from falling. It was not a premeditated act of defiance toward God. It was a reflex action. From our vantage point it seems like an act of heroism. We think that Uzzah should have heard the voice of God shouting down from heaven, crying, "Thank you, Uzzah!"

God didn't do that.

Instead, He killed Uzzah. He slaughtered him on the spot. Another summary execution.

What was Uzzah's sin? To answer that, we must look back in Jewish history to the formation of the priesthood and the special commands that God had given them. To be a priest in Israel, one had to be from the tribe of Levi. All priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests. A special family branch of the Levites were the clan of Kohathites. As the name indicates, these were the descendants of Kohath. The Kohathites were consecrated by God to a highly specialized task. They were trained for one basic job—to

take care of the sacred articles of the tabernacle: "This is the work of the Kohathites in the Tent of Meeting: the care of the most holy things" (Num. 4:4).

It is important to remember that the tabernacle was a tent. It was portable. When the tribes of Israel moved, they carried the tabernacle with them so that God would be in their midst. When the tabernacle was transported, it was necessary first to cover and shield the holy vessels. We read, "After Aaron and his sons have finished covering the holy furnishings and all the holy articles, and when the camp is ready to move, the Kohathites are to come to do the carrying. *But they must not touch the holy things or they will die.* The Kohathites are to carry those things that are in the Tent of Meeting" (Num. 4:15, italics added).

To reinforce this command, God adds further provisions and stipulations:

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "See that the Kohathite tribal clans are not cut off from the Levites. So that they may live and not die when they come near the most holy things, do this for them: Aaron and his sons are to go into the sanctuary and assign to each man his work and what he is to carry. But the Kohathites must not go in to look at the holy things, even for a moment, or they will die." (Num. 4:17-20)

Uzzah was probably a Kohathite. He knew exactly what his duties were. He had been trained thoroughly in the discipline of his calling. He understood that God had declared that the touching of the ark of the covenant was a capital offense. No Kohathite, under any circumstance, was ever permitted to touch the ark. No emergency was grounds for breaking that inviolate command. The elaborate construction of the ark, complete with golden rings through which long poles were inserted, was so fashioned as to

make it clear that the ark itself was not to be touched. The men commissioned to transport the ark could touch only the poles and the rings. Then it was the task of the Kohathites to carry the ark by these long poles. No provision was made for hurrying the procedure by transporting the ark via an oxcart.

We must ask the question, What was the ark doing on an oxcart in the first place? God was so strict about the holy things of the tabernacle that the Kohathites were not allowed even to gaze upon the ark. This, too, was a capital crime. God had decreed that if a Kohathite merely glanced at the ark in the Holy of Holies for an instant, he would die. Not only was Uzzah forbidden to touch the ark, he was forbidden even to look at it.

He touched it anyway. He stretched out his hand and placed it squarely on the ark, steadying it in place lest it fall to the ground. An act of holy heroism? No! It was an act of arrogance, a sin of presumption. Uzzah assumed that his hand was less polluted than the earth. But it wasn't the ground or the mud that would desecrate the ark; it was the touch of man. The earth is an obedient creature. It does what God tells it to do. It brings forth its yield in its season. It obeys the laws of nature that God has established. When the temperature falls to a certain point, the ground freezes. When water is added to the dust, it becomes mud, just as God designed it. The ground doesn't commit cosmic treason. There is nothing polluted about the ground.

God did not want His holy throne touched by that which was contaminated by evil, that which was in rebellion to Him, that which by its ungodly revolt had brought the whole creation to ruin and caused the ground and the sky and the waters of the sea to groan together in travail, waiting for the day of redemption. Man. It was man's touch that was forbidden.

Uzzah was not an innocent man. He was not punished without a warning. He was not punished without violating a law. There was no caprice in this act of divine judgment. There was nothing arbi-

trary or whimsical about what God did in that moment. But there was something unusual about it. The execution's suddenness and finality take us by surprise and at once shock and offend us.

There is a reason why we are offended, indeed angered, by the story of Uzzah and the story of Nadab and Abihu. We find these things difficult to stomach because we do not understand four vitally important biblical concepts: *holiness, justice, sin, and grace*. We do not understand what it means to be holy. We do not understand what justice is. We do not understand what sin is. We do not understand what grace is.

The story of Uzzah is an example of divine justice. It is not an example of divine mercy. But we cannot begin to understand divine mercy until we first have some understanding of divine justice.

When the Bible speaks of God's justice, it usually links it to divine righteousness. God's justice is *according to righteousness*. There is no such thing as justice according to unrighteousness. There is no such thing as evil justice in God. The justice of God is always and ever an expression of His holy character.

The word *justice* in the Bible refers to a conformity to a rule or a norm. God plays by the rules. The ultimate norm of justice is His own holy character. His righteousness is of two sorts. We distinguish God's internal righteousness from His external righteousness. What God *does* is always consistent with who God *is*. He always acts according to His holy character. God's internal righteousness is the moral excellence of His character. It is rooted in His absolute purity. There is no "shadow of turning" in Him. As a holy God, He is utterly incapable of an unholy act. Only unholy beings commit unjust and unrighteous acts.

There is a consistency in God, a "straightness" about Him. Human unrighteousness is often described in terms of our being not straight. We are crooked. It is not by accident that we often refer to criminals as "crooks." Crooks are so called because they are

crooked; they are not straight. God is straight. His straightness is seen in His outward behavior, His external righteousness. In all eternity God has never done a crooked thing. He killed Nadab and Abihu. He killed Uzzah. He did the same thing to Ananias and Sapphira in the New Testament. These were righteous acts of judgment.

The Bible clearly teaches that God is the Supreme Judge of the universe. The question we ask after reading about Uzzah is this: Is God qualified for the job? To function as the Supreme Judge of heaven and earth, He ought to be just. If the Supreme Judge is unjust, we have no hope of justice ever prevailing. We know that earthly judges can be corrupt. They take bribes; they show partiality; at times they act from ignorance. They make mistakes.

Not so with God. There is no corruption in Him. No one can bribe Him. He refuses to show partiality. He shows no favoritism (Acts 10:34). He never acts out of ignorance. He does not make mistakes. Bumper stickers in this world may demand, "Impeach Nixon," but only a fool asks for the impeachment of God.

The patriarch Abraham wrestled with the question of the justice of God. God announced that He was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. He planned to annihilate the cities totally—men, women, and children. Abraham was disturbed by this, concerned that in the visitation of divine wrath on the cities, the innocent would perish along with the guilty. If God wiped out the cities in an act of judgment, Abraham feared that the judgment would be indiscriminate, like a teacher punishing a whole class for the sins of one student:

Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and

the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:23-25)

"Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" A more rhetorical question has never been asked. Abraham assumed that to kill the righteous along with the wicked was far removed from any possibility with God. "Far be it from you!" Abraham had no idea how far such an act would be from God. There was never a remote possibility that God would kill innocent people along with the guilty. For God to do that, He would have to cease being holy. He would have to stop being God.

God was willing to bend over backward for Abraham. He said he would spare the whole city if Abraham could find forty-five righteous people in it. He would spare it for the sake of thirty, for the sake of ten. Abraham's task was made more simple by 80 percent. All he had to do was to find ten righteous people, and God would spare the whole city. The implication of the text is that God would have spared it for *one* person if Abraham could find one. What happened to Sodom and Gomorrah? "Early the next morning Abraham got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the LORD. He looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace" (Gen. 19:27-28).

The Judge of heaven and earth did right. No innocent people were punished. God's justice is never divorced from His righteousness. He never condemns the innocent. He never clears the guilty. He never punishes with undo severity. He never fails to reward righteousness. His justice is perfect justice.

God does not always act with justice. Sometimes He acts with mercy. Mercy is not justice, but it also is not injustice. Injustice violates righteousness. Mercy manifests kindness and grace and does no violence to righteousness. We may see *nonjustice* in God, which is *mercy*, but we never see *injustice* in God.

Again we ask, What about the obvious difference between the tone of the New Testament and that of the Old Testament? The Old Testament seems to show God as being more harsh than the New Testament does. Consider the matter of capital punishment in the Old Testament. The Old Testament lists numerous crimes that are punishable by death, including the following:

striking or cursing parents	homosexual practices
desecrating sacrificial offerings	incest
murder	bestiality
kidnapping	prostitution of virgins
idolatry	rape
child sacrifice	practicing false
blasphemy	prophecy
Sabbath violations	refusing to obey the
the practice of magic	verdict of a priest-
consulting mediums	judge
and wizards	bearing false witness in
unlawful divorce	a capital case

This is a partial list of Old Testament crimes that called for the death penalty. Against the tone of the New Testament the list seems harsh.

A few years ago *Time* magazine reported an incident that took place in the state of Maryland. A truck driver was arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct. When the police officers arrived on the scene to arrest the man, he became abusive. He used filthy language in a boisterous manner, calling the officers every name he could think of. The police were infuriated by his verbal abuse. When the man was brought before the magistrate, he was still being abusive. The maximum penalty the magistrate could impose for drunk and disorderly conduct was a one-hundred-dollar fine and thirty days in jail.

The magistrate became so angry that he wanted to “throw the book” at him. He found an antiquated law still on the books in Maryland; it was in disuse but had never been repealed. The statute prohibited public blasphemy.

Since the man had publicly profaned and blasphemed the name of God as part of the verbal abuse he hurled at the police, the magistrate tacked on another one-hundred-dollar fine and an additional thirty days in jail.

The *Time* news editor reported this incident in a spirit of moral outrage. His complaint was not that penalties for blasphemy involved a violation of the separation of church and state. His outrage was based on his charge that to put a man in jail for sixty days and to fine him two hundred dollars was a gross miscarriage of justice. Such a penalty was too severe. It was cruel and unusual.

Evidently the news editor was not upset about the penalties imposed for drunk and disorderly conduct. It was the punishment for blasphemy that he could not handle. This is in strong contrast to the law code God established in Israel. The truck driver could rejoice that he wasn't arrested by Aaron. In the Old Testament the best lawyer in Israel could not get his client a one-hundred-dollar fine for public blasphemy. The question we face is, What is worse, creating a public disturbance by getting drunk, or publicly insulting the dignity of a holy God? The news editor gave his answer. God gave a different one. If the Old Testament laws were in effect today, every television network executive would have long ago been executed.

We cannot deny that the New Testament seems to reduce the number of capital offenses. By comparison the Old Testament seems radically severe. What we fail to remember, however, is that the Old Testament list represents a massive reduction in capital crimes from the original list. The Old Testament code represents a

bending over backward of divine patience and forbearance. The Old Testament Law is one of astonishing grace.

Astonishing grace? I will say it again. The Old Testament list of capital crimes represents a massive reduction of the original list. It is an astonishing measure of grace. The Old Testament record is chiefly a record of the grace of God.

How so? To make sense out of my strange words, we must go back to the beginning, to the original rules of the universe. What was the penalty for sin in the original created order? "The soul who sins is the one who will die" (Ezek. 18:4). In creation all sin is deemed worthy of death. Every sin is a capital offense.

In creation God is not obliged to give us the gift of life. He is not in debt to us. The gift of life comes by His grace and stands under His divine authority. The task that is given to mankind in creation is to bear witness to the holiness of God, to be His image bearer. We are made to mirror and reflect the holiness of God. We are made to be His ambassadors.

God put Adam and Eve on probation and said, "If you sin, you will die." Sin brings the loss of the gift of life. The right to life is forfeited by sin. Once people sin, they forfeit any claim on God to human existence. Now the big question: When was the penalty for sin to be meted out in creation? Was the penalty stated like this: "If you sin, then someday you will die"? No! The penalty for sin was clearly stated by God: "When you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen. 2:17).

In creation the penalty for sin was not only death, but instant death. Death that very day: death as swiftly as it fell on Nadab and Abihu; death as sudden as it wiped out Uzzah; death as quick as it befell Ananias and Sapphira. "The day that you sin you will surely die."

Numerous commentators have tried to soften the divine warning by interpreting the "death" of Genesis 2 as a kind of spiritual death. That is not what the text says. The death penalty of which God warned was real death, death in the full sense of the word. To

be sure, Adam and Eve did suffer spiritual death that very day, but God granted mercy in terms of the full measure of the penalty. We have a saying that "justice delayed is justice denied." Not always. In the case of creation and mankind's fall, the full measure of justice was delayed so grace would have time to work. Here the delay of justice was not the denial of justice but the establishing of mercy and grace.

Yet the death penalty was imposed and is still imposed. All people die. We may live out our three score and ten and then die. But die we shall, because we are all under the death penalty for sin. We are all sitting on death row awaiting execution. The greatest mass killer of all time was not Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin. The greatest mass killer of all is nature. Everyone falls victim to nature, which does not operate independently from God. Nature is merely the avenger of a holy God.

Was it unjust for God to say to Adam and Eve that they would die when they sinned? Think about it. Was it evil for God to impose the death penalty for all sin? If you say yes, be careful. If you say yes, you are saying it as an expression of the very fallen, sinful nature that exposes you to the death penalty in the first place. If you say yes, you slander the character of God. If you say yes, you do violence to His holiness. If you say yes, you assail the righteous Judge of all the earth. If you say yes, you have never come to grips with what sin is. We must not say yes. We must say no and say it with conviction.

Is the death penalty for sin unjust? By no means. Remember that God voluntarily created us. He gave us the highest privilege of being His image bearers. He made us but a little lower than the angels. He freely gave us dominion over all the earth. We are not turtles. We are not fireflies. We are not caterpillars or coyotes. We are people. We are the image bearers of the holy and majestic King of the cosmos.

We have not used the gift of life for the purpose God intended.

Life on this planet has become the arena in which we daily carry out the work of cosmic treason. Our crime is far more serious, far more destructive than that of Benedict Arnold. No traitor to any king or nation has even approached the wickedness of our treason before God.

Sin is cosmic treason. Sin is treason against a perfectly pure Sovereign. It is an act of supreme ingratitude toward the One to whom we owe everything, to the One who has given us life itself. Have you ever considered the deeper implications of the slightest sin, of the most minute peccadillo? What are we saying to our Creator when we disobey Him at the slightest point? We are saying no to the righteousness of God. We are saying, "God, Your law is not good. My judgment is better than Yours. Your authority does not apply to me. I am above and beyond Your jurisdiction. I have the right to do what I want to do, not what You command me to do."

The slightest sin is an act of defiance against cosmic authority. It is a revolutionary act, a rebellious act in which we are setting ourselves in opposition to the One to whom we owe everything. It is an insult to His holiness. We become false witnesses to God. When we sin as the image bearers of God, we are saying to the whole creation, to all of nature under our dominion, to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field: "This is how God is. This is how your Creator behaves. Look in this mirror; look at us, and you will see the character of the Almighty." We say to the world, "God is covetous; God is ruthless; God is bitter; God is a murderer, a thief, a slanderer, an adulterer. God is all of these things that we are doing."

When people join together in sin, they "speak of kings and things." It is the ultimate conspiracy. We reach for the crown and plot for the throne, saying in effect to God, "We will not have You rule over us." The psalmist put it this way: "Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and

against his Anointed One. 'Let us break their chains,' they say, 'and throw off their fetters'" (Ps. 2:1-3).

When we sin, we not only commit treason against God, but we also do violence to each other. Sin violates people. There is nothing abstract about it. By my sin I hurt human beings. I injure their person; I despoil their goods; I impair their reputation; I rob from them a precious quality of life; I crush their dreams and aspirations for happiness. When I dishonor God, I dishonor all people who bear His image. Is it any wonder, then, that God takes sin so seriously?

Hans Küng, the controversial Roman Catholic theologian, writing about the seemingly harsh judgments of sin God makes in the Old Testament, says that the most mysterious aspect of the mystery of sin is not that the sinner deserves to die, but rather that the sinner in the average situation continues to exist.

Küng asks the right question. The issue is not why does God punish sin but why does He permit the ongoing human rebellion? What prince, what king, what ruler would display so much patience with a continually rebellious populace?

The key to Küng's observation is that he speaks of sinners' continuing to live in the average situation. That is, it is customary or usual for God to be forbearing. He is indeed long-suffering, patient, and slow to anger. In fact He is so slow to anger that when His anger does erupt, we are shocked and offended by it. We forget rather quickly that God's patience is designed to lead us to repentance, to give us time to be redeemed. Instead of taking advantage of this patience by coming humbly to Him for forgiveness, we use this grace as an opportunity to become more bold in our sin. We delude ourselves into thinking that either God doesn't care about it, or that He is powerless to punish us.

The supreme folly is that we think we will get away with our revolt.

Far from being a history of a harsh God, the Old Testament is the record of a God who is patient in the extreme. The Old Testament is the history of a persistently stiff-necked people who rebel time after time against God. The people became slaves in a foreign land. They cried out to God. God heard their groans and moved to redeem them. He parted the Red Sea to let them out of bondage. They responded by worshiping a golden calf.

We must still face the difficult question of the conquest of Canaan. There God explicitly commanded the slaughter of men, women, and children. The Promised Land was given to Israel by a bloody sword, a sword dripping with the blood of infants and women. God directly issued the order for the bloodbath:

When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you—and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. (Deut. 7:1-2)

Why did God issue such a command? How could He have ordered the slaughter of women and children? Again we find modern attempts to soften the event. A curriculum for high school students prepared by a major church denomination in the United States explained that in light of the New Testament revelation of God's love, we know that God did not ever issue such a belligerent command. The Old Testament is merely the record of a primitive warlike group of Hebrews who tried to justify ruthless policies by attributing them to a divine sanction.

The writers of the curriculum did not believe that God ever issued such a command. It was to be a case of intrusion of mythology

into the biblical record. Such interpretations overlook some vital aspects of the matter. First, there is a historical precedent that is far more severe than the conquest of Canaan—the Flood. In the Flood God destroyed the entire population of the world except for Noah and his family. The Flood was a “conquest of Canaan” on a grand scale. More important is the failure to understand the nature of sin. The assumption of the commentators is that God wiped out innocent people in Canaan. Of the multitudes of women and children living in Canaan, none was innocent. The conquest of Canaan was an explicit expression of God's righteous judgment on a wicked nation. He made that point clear to Israel. He also made it clear to the people of Israel that they also were not innocent. It was not as if God destroyed a wicked people for the sake of a righteous people. To the Canaanites God poured out justice. To the Jews God poured out mercy. He was quick to remind the Jews of that:

After the LORD your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, “The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.” No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you. It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people. (Deut. 9:4-6)

Three times in this passage God reminded the people of Israel that it was not because of their righteousness that He would defeat the Canaanites. He wanted to make that point clear. Israel might

have been tempted to jump to the conclusion that God was “on their side” because they were better than pagan nations. God’s announcement made that inference impossible.

The holiness of God is at the heart of the issue of the conquest of Canaan. It was because of His holiness that the act was ordained. On the one hand He moved to punish the insult to His holiness that was daily perpetrated by the Canaanites. On the other hand He was preparing a land and a nation for a holy purpose. God commanded that no mercy be shown toward the inhabitants of the land. He explained why:

Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. (Deut. 7:3-6)

God did not choose Israel because Israel was already holy. He chose them to *make* them holy. Israel was called to be holy in two senses of the word. They were called to be different, to be set apart as a vehicle of God’s plan of redemption. They were also called to be holy in the sense of being purified. Pagan practices were to be absent from Israel’s midst. They were to be sanctified by drawing near to God. Salvation for the nations was to come out of Israel. The Promised Land was to be the breeding ground for the coming Messiah. There was no room for pagan shrines and pagan rites. God ordained a scorched-earth policy to purge the land for future salvation.

We have labored the problems of the acts of divine justice found in the Old Testament. We have tried to show that God’s justice was neither whimsical nor unwarranted. We must add that there is no real conflict between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. It was the Old Testament God whom Christ called “Father.” It was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son to redeem it. It was Jesus’ meat and drink to do the will of this God. It was zeal for the God who slew Nadab, Abihu, and Uzzah that consumed Christ. It was the God who destroyed the world by a flood who pours the waters of His grace out to us.

The false conflict between the two testaments may be seen in the most brutal act of divine vengeance ever recorded in Scripture. It is not found in the Old Testament but in the New Testament. The most violent expression of God’s wrath and justice is seen in the Cross. If ever a person had room to complain of injustice, it was Jesus. He was the only innocent man ever to be punished by God. If we stagger at the wrath of God, let us stagger at the Cross. Here is where our astonishment should be focused. If we have cause for moral outrage, let it be directed at Golgotha.

The Cross was at once the most horrible and the most beautiful example of God’s wrath. It was the most just and the most gracious act in history. God would have been more than unjust, He would have been diabolical to punish Jesus if Jesus had not first willingly taken on Himself the sins of the world. Once Christ had done that, once He volunteered to be the Lamb of God, laden with our sin, then He became the most grotesque and vile thing on this planet. With the concentrated load of sin He carried, He became utterly repugnant to the Father. God poured out His wrath on this obscene thing. God made Christ accursed for the sin He bore. Herein was God’s holy justice perfectly manifest. Yet it was done for us. He took what justice demanded from us. This “for us” aspect of the

Cross is what displays the majesty of its grace. At the same time justice and grace, wrath and mercy. It is too astonishing to fathom.

We cringe at God's justice because its expression is so unusual. As Küng observed, God's usual course of action is one of grace. Grace no longer amazes us. We have grown used to it; we take it for granted.

Perhaps the best illustration of this may be found in the teaching of Jesus:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."
(Luke 13:1-5)

This is one of the most difficult of the "hard sayings" of Jesus. The question is raised, What about the people Pilate slaughtered, or the innocent people killed by the falling of the tower? Where was God in these events? The question under discussion was, How could God allow these things to happen? The question is actually a thinly veiled accusation. The issue was, as always, How can God allow innocent people to suffer?

We can hear the implied protest in the question. The eighteen innocent people were walking down the street minding their own business. They were not engaged in playing "sidewalk superintendent." They were not heckling the construction workers. They were not running away after robbing a bank. They just were

"there," at the wrong time and in the wrong place. They suffered the consequences of a fatal accident.

Note Jesus' response. He did not say, "I am very sorry to hear about this tragedy. These things happen, and there is not much we can do about it. It was fate. An accident. As good Christians you have to learn to accept the bad with the good. Keep a stiff upper lip. Be good Stoics! I know I taught you that the One who keeps Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps. But that was a poetic statement, a bit of hyperbole. Do you realize what a difficult task it is for My Father to run the universe? It gets tiring. Every now and then He must take a nap. On the afternoon in question He was very weary and grabbed forty winks. While He was nodding, the tower fell. I am sorry about that, and I will report your grievance to Him. I will ask Him to be a bit more careful in the future."

Jesus did not say, "I know I told you that My Father notices the landing of every sparrow and that He numbers the hairs on your head. Do you realize how many sparrows there are flying around? And the hairs on your head! The afternoon the tower fell, my Father was busy counting the hairs on the head of a particularly bushy-haired fellow. He was concentrating so hard on the fellow's head that He overlooked the falling tower. I will suggest that He get His priorities in order and not spend so much time with sparrows and hair."

No. Instead, Jesus rebuked the people for putting their amazement in the wrong place. He said, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish." In effect what Jesus was saying was this: "You people are asking the wrong question. You should be asking me, 'Why didn't that tower fall on my head?'"

In two decades of teaching theology, I have had countless students ask me why God doesn't save everybody. Only once did a student come to me and say, "There is something I just can't figure out. Why did God redeem *me*?"

We are not really surprised that God has redeemed us. Some-

where deep inside, in the secret chambers of our hearts, we harbor the notion that God owes us His mercy. Heaven would not be quite the same if we were excluded from it. We know that we are sinners, but we are surely not as bad as we could be. There are enough redeeming features to our personalities that if God is really just, He will include us in salvation. What amazes us is justice, not grace.

Our tendency to take grace for granted was powerfully demonstrated while I was teaching college students. I had the assignment of teaching a freshman Old Testament course to 250 students at a Christian college. On the first day of class I went over the course assignments carefully. My experience taught me that the assignment of term papers required a special degree of explanation. This course required three short papers. I explained to the students that the first paper was due on my desk by noon the last day of September. No extensions were to be given except for students who were physically confined to the infirmary or who had deaths in the immediate family. If the paper was not turned in on time, the student would receive an F for the assignment. The students acknowledged that they understood the requirements.

On the last day of September, 225 students dutifully handed in their term papers. Twenty-five students stood, quaking in terror, full of remorse. They cried out, "Oh, Professor Sproul. We are so sorry. We didn't budget our time properly. We didn't make the proper adjustment from high school to college. Please don't give us an F. Please, oh, please give us an extension."

I bowed to their pleas for mercy. "All right," I said. "I'll give you a break this time. But, remember, the next assignment is due the last day of October."

The students were profuse in their gratitude and filled the air with solemn promises of being on time for the next assignment. Then came the last day of October. Two hundred students came with their papers. Fifty students came empty-handed. They were nervous but not in panic. When I asked for their papers, again they were contrite.

"Oh, Professor. It was Homecoming Week. Besides it is midterm, and all of our assignments are due in other classes. Please give us one more chance. We promise it will never happen again."

Once more I relented. I said, "OK, but this is the last time. If you are late for the next paper, it will be an F. No excuses, no whining. F. Is that clear?"

"Oh, yes, Professor. You are terrific." Spontaneously the class began to sing, "We love you, Prof Sproul. Oh, yes we do." I was Mr. Popularity.

Can you guess what happened on the last day of November? Right. One hundred and fifty students came with their term papers. The other hundred strolled into the lecture hall utterly unconcerned. "Where are your term papers?" I asked.

One student replied, "Oh, don't worry, Prof, we're working on them. We'll have them for you in a couple of days, no sweat."

I picked up my lethal black grade book and began taking down names. "Johnson! Do you have your paper?"

"No sir" came the reply.

"F," I said as I wrote the grade in the book. "Muldaney! Do you have your paper?"

Again, "No sir" was the reply. I marked another F in the book.

The students reacted with unmitigated fury. They howled in protest, screaming, "That's not fair!"

I looked at one of the howling students, "Lavery! You think it's not fair?"

"Yes," he growled in response.

"I see. It's justice you want? I seem to recall that you were late with your paper the last time. If you insist on justice, you will certainly get it. I'll not only give you an F for this assignment, but I'll change your last grade to the F you so richly deserved."

The student was stunned. He had no more arguments to make. He apologized for being so hasty and was suddenly happy to settle for one F instead of two.

The students had quickly taken my mercy for granted. They assumed it. When justice suddenly fell, they were unprepared for it. It came as a shock, and they were outraged. This, after only two doses of mercy in the space of two months.

The normal activity of God involves far more mercy than I showed those students with their term papers. Old Testament history covers hundreds of years. In that time God was repeatedly merciful. When His divine judgment fell on Nadab or Uzzah, the response was shock and outrage. We have come to expect God to be merciful. From there the next step is easy: We demand it. When it is not forthcoming, our first response is anger against God, coupled with the protest: "It isn't fair." We soon forget that with our first sin we have forfeited all rights to the gift of life. That I am drawing breath this morning is an act of divine mercy. God owes me nothing. I owe Him everything. If He allows a tower to fall on my head this afternoon, I cannot claim injustice.

One of our basic problems is the confusion of justice and mercy. We live in a world where injustices happen. They happen among people. Every one of us at some time has been a victim of injustice at the hands of another person. Everyone of us at some time has committed an injustice against another person. People treat each other unfairly. One thing is certain: No matter how much injustice I have suffered from the hands of other people, I have never suffered the slightest injustice from the hand of God.

Suppose a person falsely accuses me of stealing money. Charges are brought against me, and I am arrested and sent to prison. On the human level, I have been a victim of gross injustice. I have every right to cry out to God and plead for vindication in this world. I can complain about being falsely persecuted. God is angry with people for unjustly putting me in prison. God promises to vindicate me from this injustice someday. Injustice is real, and it happens every day in this world.

The injustices we suffer are all of a *horizontal* sort. They happen between actors in this world. Yet standing over and above this world is the Great Judge of all. My relationship to Him is vertical. In terms of that vertical relationship I never suffer an injustice. Though people may mistreat me, God never does. That God allows a human being to treat me unjustly is just of God. While I may complain to God about the human, horizontal injustice I have suffered, I cannot rise up and accuse God of committing a vertical injustice by allowing the human injustice to befall me. God would be perfectly just to allow me to be thrown in prison for life for a crime I didn't commit. I may be innocent before other people, but I am guilty before God.

We often blame God for the injustices done to us and harbor in our souls the bitter feeling that God has not been fair toward us. Even if we recognize that He is gracious, we think that He has not been gracious enough. We think we deserve more grace.

Please read that last sentence again: *We think we deserve more grace*. What is wrong with that sentence? Grammatically it is fine. But there is something seriously wrong with the content, with the meaning of the sentence.

It is impossible for anyone, anywhere, anytime to *deserve* grace. Grace by definition is undeserved. As soon as we talk about deserving something, we are no longer talking about grace; we are talking about justice. Only justice can be deserved. God is never obligated to be merciful. Mercy and grace must be voluntary or they are no longer mercy and grace. God never "owes" grace. He reminds us more than once: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy" (Exod. 33:19). This is the divine prerogative. God reserves for Himself the supreme right of executive clemency.

Suppose ten people sin and sin equally. Suppose God punishes five of them and is merciful to the other five. Is this injustice? No! In this situation five people get justice and five get mercy. No one gets injustice. What we tend to assume is this: If

God is merciful to five, He must be equally merciful to the other five. Why? He is never obligated to be merciful. If He is merciful to nine of the ten, the tenth cannot claim to be a victim of injustice. God never owes mercy. God is not obliged to treat all people equally. Maybe I'd better say that again. *God is never obliged to treat all people equally.* If He were ever unjust to us, we would have reason to complain. But simply because He grants mercy to my neighbor, it gives me no claim on His mercy. Again we must remember that mercy is always voluntary. "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy."

I will receive only justice or mercy from God. I never receive injustice from His hand. We may request that God help us get justice at the hands of other people, but we would be utterly foolish ever to ask Him for justice from Himself. I warn my students: "Don't ever ask God for justice—you might get it."

It is the confusion between justice and mercy that makes us shrink in horror when we read the stories of Nadab, Abihu, and Uzzah. When God's justice falls, we are offended because we think God owes perpetual mercy. We must not take His grace for granted. We must never lose our capacity to be amazed by grace. We sing the song, "Amazing Justice." Our lyrics tend to go like this:

*Amazing Justice, cruel and sharp
That wounds a saint like me:
I'm so darn good it makes no sense—
The tower fell on me!*

I remember preaching a "practice sermon" in preaching class in seminary. In my sermon I was extolling the marvels of God's grace. As the hymn says, I spoke of "God's grace, infinite grace."

At the end of my sermon the professor had a question for me. "Mr. Sproul," he said, "where did you ever get the idea that God's grace is infinite? Is there absolutely no limit to His grace?" As soon

as he asked that question, I knew I was in trouble. I could quote him chapter and verse of the hymn that taught me that, but somehow I couldn't come up with a single Scripture verse that taught God's grace is infinite.

The reason I couldn't find any Scripture passage to support my statement is because there is none. God's grace is not infinite. God is infinite, and God is gracious. We experience the grace of an infinite God, but grace is not infinite. God sets limits to His patience and forbearance. He warns us over and over again that someday the ax will fall and His judgment will be poured out.

Since it is our tendency to take grace for granted, my guess is that God found it necessary from time to time to remind Israel that grace must never be assumed. On rare but dramatic occasions He showed the dreadful power of His justice. He killed Nadab and Abihu. He killed Uzzah. He commanded the slaughter of the Canaanites. It is as if He were saying, "Be careful. While you enjoy the benefits of my grace, don't forget my justice. Don't forget the gravity of sin. Remember that I am holy."

Allowing God's Holiness to Touch Our Lives

As you reflect about what you have learned and rediscovered about God's holiness, answer these questions. Use a journal to record your responses to God's holiness, or discuss your responses with a friend.

1. In what ways does God's justice frighten you? In what ways does it comfort you?
2. What is your response when you realize that you deserve to die because of your sin?
3. What is your response when you realize that God's justice demanded Christ's death for you?
4. In what ways has God demonstrated His mercy to you?