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Divine Justice: When?

MOST BOOKS ABOUT HELL contain very little information from the Old Testament simply because their authors are looking for a certain image of hell, a place of unending conscious torment. The Old Testament provides no details about such a place, sending these authors back from their narrow search empty-handed and somewhat apologetic. We looked, they honestly report, but we could find nothing.¹

This does *not* mean that the Old Testament has nothing to contribute on the topic of hell. It provides important information, but we must ask the proper question to access it. If we look for signs that say “hell,” or search for the traditionalist version or vision of hell, we will find nothing. But if we move through the Old Testament with a different question, we will soon discover so much material that we will need to make more than one trip to take it all back home.

What Can the Old Testament Tell Us?

The question that opens the doors to biblical meaning is more general: *What data does the Old Testament contain about the end of the wicked?* In this chapter and the two chapters that follow, we will journey through the Old Testament Scriptures with that question clearly before us. But first we need to meet an earlier explorer of the Old Testament, whose past discoveries can encourage us as we begin.

No one has mined the Old Testament for information about the end of the wicked more than LeRoy Edwin Froom, author of a cyclopedic two-volume study titled *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*. Froom finds fifty different Hebrew verbs that describe the final fate of the wicked—and all signify different aspects of destruction.² Such verbs are buttressed, he says, by figurative or proverbial expressions that also speak “everywhere

1. In the multi-author book, *Hell Under Fire*, Daniel I. Block contributes the chapter titled “The Old Testament on Hell,” and he begins the chapter with this question and answer: “What does the Old Testament teach about hell? The simple answer to this question is, ‘Very little.’” (Block, “The Old Testament on Hell,” 44.)

2. Froom, *Conditionalist Faith*, 1:106.

and always” of “the *decomposition*, of the *breaking up of the organism* and *final cessation of the existence of being*—never that of immortal life in endless suffering.”³

Froom combines both lists to present some seventy English expressions that describe the end of sinners. The cumulative impact of this list is most impressive—despite Froom’s occasional over-reaching—particularly in view of the resounding silence from traditionalist authors who oppose his view.⁴

Our goal in these three chapters is not to repeat Froom, but to build on his efforts, improve on his methods, and progress beyond his results. I will be sensitive to observe three different genres of texts—poetic, historical, and prophetic, and to read each text in its context, not read meanings into the texts, and not extract meanings from the texts that are not there.

Moral Principles of Divine Justice

First we notice texts from the poetic books of the Old Testament that reflect moral principles of divine justice. Utilizing a broad variety of words, metaphors, and similes, these passages of Scripture state the outcome of God’s justice when applied to those who do good and to those who do evil. These texts are significant for our study because they express moral principles inherent in God’s own character, which never changes and cannot be thwarted.

On earth, men and women who do very evil things sometimes escape unpunished and even undetected. If God says that evildoers will meet a particular end, and that does not happen now during life on earth, it will surely occur in the age to come. For this reason, texts that state moral principles of divine justice say something important on our subject.

Someone might object that texts of this sort specifically refer only to judgments during the present life and say nothing about the punishment awaiting in the age to

3. Ibid., 107. For example, the wicked will be as: a vessel broken to pieces, ashes trodden underfoot, smoke that vanishes, chaff carried away by the wind, tow that is burned, thorns and stubble in fire, vine branches pruned off, wax that melts, fat of sacrifices, a dream that vanishes, etc.

Petavel speaks of the “multitude of proverbial expressions, a long succession of images which sometimes seem to exclude each other, but which always, by association of ideas, and like fractions reduced to a common denominator, are found to be in accord when used to describe the end of the existence of evil and of obstinate evildoers. Everywhere we find the notion of a final cessation of being, of a return to a state of unconsciousness, never that of a perpetual life in suffering” (Petavel, *The Problem of Immortality*, 88–89).

4. Froom, *Conditionalist Faith*, 1:108–10. Several of Froom’s seventy examples seem less applicable to the subject, and a few appear to be completely out of place. Some call on God to judge the wicked or give the righteous victory over their enemies, with no apparent reference to last things (Pss 55:23; 60:12; 94:23; 104:35; 139:19). Others praise God for deliverance over the wicked (Pss 118:12; 119:119; Isa 43:17). One simply states temporal blessings given or withheld by God (Prov 13:9). Another prescribes the ultimate penalty of excision under the Law of Moses (Exod 22:20). Closely akin are three passages which speak of sin’s original death penalty, itself the subject of much debate (Gen 3:19; Ezek 18:4, 20). Two others appear to speak only of God’s power to sustain life—a relevant point to the discussion but one needing more explanation than here given (Ps 75:3; Isa 40:24).

come.⁵ Indeed, many such statements do refer to earthly consequences of wrongdoing. Wisdom literature deals in proverbs, aphorisms, and sayings about life here and now. However, so long as one insists that God's justice will finally triumph over injustice, and acknowledges that perfect justice does not always prevail in this life, there is a place for these texts. They speak *indirectly*, by implication. They communicate in terms of *principle*. They lead and instruct by *implication*. Whoever sees the wicked person prosper in life and die in peace, may rightly ask, "Is this all there is to God's justice? Do the wicked escape so easily?" These texts assure us that they will not escape.

Because of this apparent injustice, these passages fairly may be said to point to a final reckoning for the wicked beyond temporal death. Seven psalms in particular call for our consideration.

Psalm 11:1–7

This psalm comes immediately after Ps 10, which portrays the wicked man in his prosperity mocking God's justice. "The wicked man is so arrogant he always thinks, 'God won't hold me accountable; he doesn't care.' He is secure at all times. He has no regard for your commands; he disdains all his enemies. He says to himself, 'I will never be up-ended, because I experience no calamity'" (Ps 10:4–6, NET).

In response, the Psalmist discusses moral principles of divine justice (Ps 11:1–7). Even now God rules from his heavenly throne, observing and examining both righteous and wicked (vv. 4–5). Evildoers on earth sometimes destroy the very foundation of moral society, and the godly know nothing they can do (v. 3). Then they may know that God is on the throne and that his day of reckoning will surely come. The godless may hide in the shadows and ambush the righteous—now (v. 2); now they may tantalize and mock those who trust in God (v. 1). But then God will reverse the roles and even the score. "On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur (brimstone, AV); a scorching wind will be their lot" (v. 6). Then "upright men will see his face" (v. 7).

This world does not reward virtue or punish evil, but a day of divine reckoning will surely come. This psalm pictures the fate of the wicked in terms taken from the punishment of Sodom, when "the Lord rained down burning sulfur" (Gen 19:24) and "overthrew" city, people and vegetation (Gen 19:25). He "destroyed" the wicked in a "catastrophe" so thorough that the next day Abraham could see nothing but "dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace" (Gen 19:28–29).

Psalm 34:8–22

This psalm praises God, who delivers his people from their troubles. According to the heading, David wrote the psalm after he escaped from the Philistine king, Abimelech

5. Thus Peterson (*Hell on Trial*, 26), and Gerstner (*Repent or Perish*, 109). The Bible sometimes teaches indirectly, by suggestion, rhetorical question or by principle. These texts from the Old Testament Wisdom literature teach us *indirectly*, if we will hear. Their moral argument is one element of evidence in this cumulative case for conditionalism.

(Achish in 1 Sam 21:10–15). Peter uses this psalm to encourage suffering Christians, quoting from verse 8 (1 Pet 2:3) and also verses 12–16a (1 Pet 3:10–12).

The psalm contrasts the fates of those who trust God and those who do not. The one who fears God and takes refuge in him will find him good (v. 8). Such a one will lack for nothing good (vv. 9–10). God will be close to him in need (v. 18), see his plight and hear his cries (vv. 15, 17), and save or deliver him from trouble (vv. 17, 19). The psalm tells how to have a long and good life (vv. 12–14); it also reassures God’s people that, in the end, God will redeem them and not even one of them will be condemned (v. 22).

In contrast to this, God turns his face against the evil (v. 16), who finally are slain by their own wickedness (v. 21). At the last, God will condemn them (v. 21) and cut off their memory from the earth (v. 16).

These contrasts catch our attention and speak to our minds and hearts. Whether a person is good or evil, God is the One to whom each must finally give account. The righteous may expect to be delivered and vindicated because God is their mighty savior. The wicked must know that their adversary and judge will be God and not humankind.

But as often as not, people do not reach these destinies in earthly life. The righteous sometimes die in unjust suffering and shame; the wicked sometimes die in prosperity and peace. The psalm therefore looks beyond the present life for its infallible fulfillment. In that sense, at least, it speaks of blessing and punishment in the world to come. Whether we see it now or not, the psalm promises a day when the righteous will shine (v. 5) but the wicked will be no more (v. 16). This is God’s word on the matter, and God will do what he says.

Psalm 37:1–40

This psalm describes the security of those who trust in God and the insecurity of the wicked. David observes: “I have seen a wicked and ruthless man flourishing like a green tree in its native soil, but he soon passed away and was no more; though I looked for him, he could not be found” (vv. 35–36). This is the way with the wicked, he says, as he boldly extends his observation to wicked men in general.

Job’s objection comes to our mind: where do we see this happening to the wicked? The answer must be that we do not yet see their end. This is made more certain by Jesus’ use of the promise from verse 11 that “the meek will inherit the earth” (Matt 5:5), which in the Beatitudes is synonymous with the kingdom of God. The meek do not inherit the land—now. But like the writer of Hebrews, Jesus and David speak of the pilgrim’s future homeland (Heb 11:8–16) in the world to come (Heb 2:5). They look, with Peter, for the new heaven and earth, the home of righteousness (2 Pet 3:13).

In this light the couplet in verse 10 to the expression Jesus quotes becomes more significant. “A little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look for them, they will not be found.” This is said not once but repeatedly throughout the psalm. David assures the godly that the wicked:

- will soon wither like the grass and die away like green plants (v. 2);

- will be no more so they cannot be found (v. 10);
- will be laughed at by the Lord, for their day is coming (v. 13);
- will be pierced by their own swords, and their bows will be broken (v. 15);
- will be broken in power (v. 17);
- will perish like the beauty of the fields and vanish like smoke (v. 20);
- will be cut off (vv. 22, 28, 34, 38);
- will be destroyed (v. 38).

In this psalm David defines die and destroy by a variety of figures from nature. The wicked will be like grass that withers or smoke that vanishes when they “die” and are “destroyed.” These are not mere hollow hopes of Job’s shallow and uninspired friends. They are the solemn promises of David as he speaks by the Holy Spirit (Matt 22:43; Acts 2:29–30). Those who trust in God might not see it happen now. But they are to wait patiently for the Lord’s time, confident that he will bring his word to pass (vv. 7, 34). This psalm is surely instructive concerning the final fate of those who mock at God.

Psalm 50

This psalm of Asaph extols God, who judges both the righteous and the wicked. God comes in fire and tempest to judge his people (vv. 3–6). “Call upon me in the day of trouble,” he invites the godly; “I will deliver you, and you will honor me” (v. 15). But to the wicked God says: “What right have you to recite my laws or take my covenant on your lips?” (v.16). “Consider this,” he says to those who forget God, “or I will tear you to pieces, with none to rescue” (v. 22).

The picture is the usual one. God comes in fire storm for judgment. It is symbolic, and its words are chosen for impact rather than literal description. But they teach something, and what they teach is conveyed to the emotions by the threat, “I will tear you to pieces, with none to rescue.”

Psalm 58

Imprecatory psalms have long disturbed Christian readers. How can the godly man call for vengeance on his enemies? Should he not, rather, ask God to forgive them? It is important for us to understand that David’s enemies are also God’s enemies (that finally is why they are David’s) and that David is turning all vengeance over to God. In this context we observe what David expected to happen when God took vengeance.

We must not read back into the Old Testament what is not there. Rather, we must listen to each passage for its own message, however shadowy or vague that message might be. Here is what David regards as God’s just punishment in this psalm:

- their teeth will be broken in their mouths (v. 6);
- they will vanish like water that flows away (v. 7);

- they will melt like a slug as it moves along (v. 8);
- they will not see the sun, like a stillborn child (v. 8);
- their blood will bathe the feet of the righteous (v. 10).

The ultimate result will be God's honor. People will then exclaim: "Surely the righteous still are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges the earth" (v. 11).

Psalm 69:22–28

New Testament writers frequently quote this imprecatory psalm. They apply its words to Jesus (v. 9/John 2:17; Rom 15:3; v. 21/John 19:28–30) on the one hand, and to Judas (v. 25/Acts 1:20) and unbelieving Israel (vv. 22–23/Rom 11:9–10) on the other. Here is the desperate cry of a poor man, outnumbered and overpowered by wicked enemies, calling on God for vindication (justification) and deliverance (salvation).

The Psalmist longs to see God's wrath poured out on the wicked (v. 24), their place deserted and their tents empty (v. 25). He is sure they will have no part in God's salvation (v. 27) but rather will be blotted out of the book of life (v. 28). God will finally hear the righteous (vv. 32–33); they and their children will inherit Zion (vv. 34–36).

In this psalm, the end of the wicked is that they cannot be found! Their place is empty—they are not listed among the living. They are victims of the righteous wrath of God. Meanwhile, the righteous enjoy God's salvation. The language is figurative, the style is poetic, but the meaning is clear and the message is true. We must make room in our understanding for the imagery of this psalm.

Psalm 145

David praises God for his goodness in this psalm, which is general in tone and universal in scope. It is not limited to a particular occasion or person or incident. God's gracious kingdom is forever (vv. 8–13). He also rules in justice, which gives the godly hope.

"The Lord is righteous in all his ways . . . The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy" (vv. 17, 20). This is a general statement, but it informs us so far as it goes, and it is in complete harmony with the language of the rest of Scripture.

Summary

Throughout the Old Testament, God reveals truth about the end of the wicked in various ways. The books of poetry—Job, Psalms, and Proverbs—reflect on the meaning and value of life under the sun. What will be the difference between godly and ungodly in the end? How does it pay to serve God? Why do the righteous sometimes die in poverty while the wicked lay down in fame and prosperity?

To answer these questions, the poetic books take us behind the scenes. There they point to the sovereign God on his throne, and tell us that God will also one day judge. Then he will vindicate all who trust in him. The godless will come to nothing. They will perish, will disappear, will not be found. Their place will be empty. They will no longer exist.

Their bows will be broken and their own spears will slay them. The godly will wipe their feet in the wicked man's blood. The wicked man's name will not be found in the register of the living. Those who trusted in God will rejoice in his salvation. They will endure forever. They and their children will inhabit Zion. They will be vindicated when they see God and dwell with him. They will inherit the earth.

The language of poetry is frequently figurative. Figures are not to be taken literally. God's people will not turn on a faucet of wicked men's blood to bathe their feet. However, a figure does truly correspond to the truth it illustrates, otherwise it misleads and deceives. Without being literal, therefore, we may learn from these passages of Scripture. They say nothing of conscious unending torment.

None of them hints at a fire that tortures but does not kill. They do not envision the presence of the wicked forever—even in a distant place. Rather, they picture a time and a world where the wicked will not be. There the meek will rejoice in God's presence forever. Every living creature will praise God, who has shown himself to be a righteous judge.

These things do not happen now. We look for their fulfillment, therefore, in the age to come. Jesus and the New Testament writers quote from these psalms and apply their words to the coming age. They tell men and women of faith today that the same moral principles of divine government rule behind the scenes.

Interaction

Although Daniel Block's chapter in *Hell Under Fire* is titled "The Old Testament on Hell," he looks only at Old Testament words that describe the netherworld and does not mention moral principles of divine justice. Peterson and Davies are similarly silent on the subject. John Gerstner mentions this argument from the poetic books, based on moral principles of divine judgment, but he dismisses it as of "little cogency for the matter in question."⁶

Paul Helm cites Pss 37 and 145 in making the point that God is perfectly just and that heaven and hell will bring to full reconciliation earthly moral accounts left askew by death.⁷ John Blanchard admirably acknowledges the underlying principle of divine justice developed in this chapter. He first reassures the reader that God is in control, a fact that finally will become apparent to all. Blanchard writes: "As surely as the world is a moral creation, it will come to a moral conclusion. The judgments of God fall often enough in this world to let us know that God judges, but seldom enough to let us know that there

6. Gerstner, *Repent or Perish*, 111.

7. Helm, *The Last Things*, 71, 121.

must be a judgment to come. God is not always a God of immediate justice, but he is a God of ultimate justice. Nothing less than the character of God is at stake here.”⁸

However, divine justice is not always carried out during this life, Blanchard observes, therefore it will be executed in the age to come: “The only satisfying alternative to the injustices of this life is perfect justice in the next one; the only remedy for the present triumph of evil over good is the future triumph of good over evil. In a moral universe all bills must be paid and all accounts settled.”⁹

Larry Dixon likewise draws this fundamental lesson, though somewhat less directly. While discussing God’s anger at sinners, Dixon notes that “the afflicted do not always get their ‘rights’ in this life, the wicked often prosper in inverse proportion to their character, and God does declare that he holds some in contempt.”¹⁰

The Old Testament not only says that divine justice will be done but also tells what mortals can expect to see when that takes place. If men escape justice in the present life, God’s moral character assures us that it will be meted out later. To describe what that will look like, the Old Testament uses as many as seventy metaphors—all taken from experiences and scenes of ordinary life. Cumulatively, these scenes portray a consummation when wickedness will no longer be present and unrepentant sinners will forever have been made extinct.

8. Blanchard, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* 101.

9. Ibid. Blanchard’s sentence continues: “but annihilationism throws these hopes out of the window.” He does not agree with the view set forth here, but that is not the “annihilationism” of which he speaks. Rather he is refuting the notion “that human beings are annihilated at death,” never to be seen again (ibid., 61). If that were the case, the injustices of this life would be the final word.

10. Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News*, 167.