

Evil Brings Its Own Reward

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It is true that in many cases evil brings its own reward. One could argue, for example, that the Exile was the natural result of Israel's departure from God. But this is not always the case.

The Past

There have also been summary judgments on individuals under more than natural circumstances, such as Uzzah (2 Sam 6:3-7), and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). Perhaps there is another way to explain these unusual cases.

Some summary judgments, however, offer no natural explanation. These are so out of the ordinary, that it would be difficult to frame an argument confined to the scope of what could possibly be a natural result. In this category we have the story of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, in which the earth opened, the rebels were swallowed by it, and the earth then closed over them (Num 16:1-35). This can only be described as a divine intervention.

Another example along these lines is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:1-28), in which fire and brimstone rained down from heaven. But this account is dwarfed by what happened in the days of Noah. The evil done before and during Noah's time did not just naturally lead to the entire biosphere being turned out of its course, such that water which had been above the earth came down, water which had been under the earth came up, and the whole creation was destroyed by a worldwide flood (Gen 7:1-24).

The Future

In the case of God's promise to bring evil to an end and destroy the world by fire, some object that this would cause sinners discomfort. And yes, it would. But this fact needs to be placed in context. In the flood people were alive until they drowned. When the ground beneath their feet opened up to swallow Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, they were alive until they were crushed. None of this was pleasant, but none of it was torture. Torture is not just inflicting pain, but having the goal and purpose of inflicting pain. Causing people to hurt is not why God does things.

At the end of all things Scripture repeatedly says that sin and sinners will be consumed by fire (Isa 47:14; Nah 1:10; Mal 4:1; Matt 3:12; Luke 3:17; 2 Pet 3:10). Will the death of the wicked be unpleasant? Certainly. Does their death constitute torture?

No. The whole point of God's ultimate disposition of sinners is that He does not torture them. He does not prolong their suffering, but brings them to a full end.

Discussion

It would be possible to develop a certain myopia in thinking about the end of the wicked. In passages such as 2 Pet 3:10, the focus is not on sinners. "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed" (2 Pet 3:10). The point Peter makes is that "the heavens" will pass away, "the heavenly bodies" will be burned up, "the earth" will be destroyed. The wicked are present in this passage only by implication.

Nor are the wicked the focus of Matt 25:41, where Jesus mentions them in connection with "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt 25:41). The wicked get the reward of the leader they have chosen, just as the righteousness get the reward of the Leader they have chosen. The focus here is on Satan, just as earlier it was on the earth, the heavenly bodies, and the heavens. Not the wicked. They are destroyed by fire, but are not the main thing being destroyed. Indeed, the whole matter of having to destroy them frustrates God's benevolent purpose.

In this context, if God destroys Satan and his angels by fire, and the earth, and the heavenly bodies, and the heavens themselves, then preserving the wicked from destruction at the same time would require precisely the sort of divine intervention that the model seeks to avoid – with God working to preserve evil, rather than eradicate it..

The whole point is to start over, to make a fresh start: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more" (Rev 21:1). Here again, the focus is not on the wicked, but on the first heaven and the first earth. When these go, sinners go. Consistency requires this.

I have argued that cleansing the earth by fire is a divine intervention in the same sense that cleansing the earth by water was earlier. But let us say there is some other explanation. God's only response to sin is to let things take their course, with whatever results follow naturally from that. In this case, assuming that the events occurred as Scripture reports them, the natural result of sin in Noah's day was a worldwide flood; the natural result of sin in the case of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram was that the ground swallows them; and the natural result of sin in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah was fire and brimstone raining down from the sky.

To account for a full range of biblical data, one must go beyond the hypothesis that God takes no active measures to eradicate evil (Zeph 1:12). It is not the case that, after letting sin take its course, God continues letting sin takes its course, and ultimately shifts responsibility for any final outcome to the wicked themselves. Suggesting that the Lord does not Himself take matters in hand is not a biblical position.