

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Judgment: Human and Divine

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Dear Friends,

"It isn't fair" is a frequent response to the fallen and sinful events that occasionally invade the life of even the most faithful of believers. Rather than attributing these sinful events to God, Scripture consistently reminds us that the source of sin and evil is either man or satanic in origin and cause. Whether we consider human sin or natural disasters, such as the recent hurricane that hit the gulf area of our country, people are prone to ask, "Where is God when these things occur?" Professing Christians are inclined to respond to such problems with one of two reactions.

Some are constantly ready to attribute the sin or catastrophe to God. "God is judging our country by the terrorists' acts of 9/11." "God is judging New Orleans and its reputation for sin by Katrina." Or they will simply assert that God causes everything, so He must have a benevolent and greater reason for either causing or "allowing" such events. I haven't done so, but, when I hear someone make such assertions, I am inclined to ask, "And how do you know with such certainty that this particular event is the result of divine judgment?" The fact that God occasionally used either evil men/cultures or natural disasters in Scripture as His instrument of judgment does not justify the claim that every such event is the result of divine judgment. The theological error of determinism, the idea that God causes or orchestrates everything that occurs, builds on the logical fallacy of composition, occasionally referred to as the logical fallacy of the "parts to the whole." If one part of something possesses certain specific characteristics, this logical fallacy errantly concludes that the whole of the thing must possess identical characteristics. I drive a brown Toyota Camry. The logical fallacy of composition would errantly conclude that every Toyota Camry must be brown. No thinking Bible student will deny that God on occasion used evil nations and natural disasters as His instrument of judgment in the Scriptural record, but this obvious fact does not justify the errant and illogical conclusion that God either causes or uses every such event.

Others react in the opposite direction and question the power or goodness of God. "How could a good God allow such things to occur?" Advocates of this conclusion clearly reject the error of determinism, but they inconsistently seek a deterministic explanation for the moral dilemma that they raise. We live in a fallen and sinful world, not the perfect world that God created, as described in Genesis chapters One and Two. Man's sin, not God's errantly presumed robotic governance, is assigned as the Biblical explanation for such events.

I offer a third alternative that I believe more affirms the Biblical teaching. Rather than causing or orchestrating every event that occurs, Scripture affirms that God is faithfully, reliably, and constantly present with His people as they face every problem, calamity, inequity, or disaster of life. [Heb 13:5-6](#) comforts the child of God with this amazing truth. Whether we "feel" God's presence in our moments of trial or not, He assures us that he is there and that His grace and support will never leave us to face our trials alone. This truth contradicts both of the typical alternatives that either blame God (directly or indirectly) or question His power and goodness. I offer for your consideration that one of these choices is as errant and unscriptural in its foundations as the other. Scripture consistently rejects the idea that God causes either sin or every natural disaster that occurs. Often advocates of determinism will join Biblical Christians in rejecting the idea that God causes sin. However, their bent toward determinism

forces them to the logical idea, even if they deny it in words. Around 1900 our own Primitive Baptist family faced this precise problem. The advocates of determinism—for the most part—rejected the idea that God causes sin. However, they affirmed that God "unconditionally" causes our discipleship and good works so that we cannot do otherwise. They never quite explained rationally the problems of failed discipleship or partial discipleship. For example, if we examine the life of Lot in Genesis, we dislike the man on clear moral grounds. The final chapter of his life appears in a disgraceful moral collapse in a cave in drunken incest with his daughters! The typical response of advocates of determinism is that such conduct indicates that Lot was never really a child of God at all, or he would never have fallen so low into sin, especially in the final chapter of his life as recorded in Scripture. However, Peter ([2Pe 2:8](#)) mentions Lot's rejection of the sinful lifestyles of Sodom and Gomorrah, and refers to him as "that righteous man." Obviously Peter is not referring to Lot's sins in the cave, but—by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—he concludes that Lot was in fact a truly righteous man, though the final chapter of his life in the Biblical record faithfully reports his moment of sin and shame. One would think that, if God causes our discipleship, we would be perfect disciples. Christian determinism seeks to avoid the contradictory idea that God is holy and altogether righteous, and at the same time the cause of sin, but its conclusions led many advocates of this idea in following generations to reach that precise conclusion. Similar problems appear in a study of historical theology in the form of the ancient debate between infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism explanations of sin and salvation. The "infra" view stops distinctly—and intentionally—short of imputing the cause of sin to God, while the "supra" view, though typically denying the idea that God causes sin, logically faces difficulty supporting its denial of God causing sin. I am convinced that a number of folks today who claim to be "infra" are in fact "supra." The "supra" determinist will observe a sinful confusion and schism in one of the Lord's churches and observe that "God had something really good in mind for these folks, and it had to come about by this problem," despite Scripture's specific rejection of such a notion ([1Co 14:33](#)). The Bible believing "infra" Christian will see the same events and recoil at the disrespect shown by anyone who fosters such schism in one of the Lord's churches in their sinful conduct, correctly laying the responsibility for this sinful act at the feet of the people who caused it, not to God. In these verses Solomon attributes the choice of sin to sinful men, not to God, the same teaching that Scripture consistently presents for our instruction. The "supra" mindset offers the fact that Job's "miserable comforters" repeatedly told Job that God had caused his losses and suffering, but they fail to grasp the major point at the conclusion of the book of Job (as well as the primary purpose of the book of Job as defined by [Jas 5:11](#)). Either Job or his "miserable comforters" was wrong; both could not be right. In the end God rebuked them and required that they bring their offerings to Job, whose sacrifices God would accept. If God rejected these fellows—and He did—we should hardly use them as authorities for our own theology! The reality of a final, comprehensive, and righteous judgment for the Christian who understands Biblical teaching on the subject is not a truth that stirs fear or anxiety. Rather it is a doctrine that instills comfort and joy. Regardless of the inequity and the apparent success of sin in this life, God assures us in such lessons as these that He will have the last word against sin—and it shall be a righteous judgment. This major Biblical doctrine answers the question of inequity and the appearance of success in sin and failure in righteousness far better than any other available explanation.

God bless,
Joe Holder

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Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him: But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow;

because he feareth not before God. (Ec 8:11-13) Criminologists may vary widely in their assessments and explanations, but few would disagree that our country's penal system has hopelessly failed in its professed task of "rehabilitating" criminals, or for that matter of even discouraging them from repeating their criminal activity. I am inclined to question the validity of the idea that prison rehabilitates hardened criminals. Humans cannot fully know what is in the heart of another human, but we may safely conclude that putting a hardened criminal in the same facility as a person who commits a single crime and shows genuine remorse for his deed will not improve the moral character of the fellow who committed a single crime. It will more likely further corrupt him than rehabilitate him. Perhaps our culture should seek out ways to distinguish between the hardened criminal who will, short of divine intervention, not be rehabilitated and the "one-time offender." Incarcerate the one to protect society from his evil deeds, and use effective rehabilitative activities with the other. Aside from an interesting and quite pertinent philosophical discussion regarding our nation's penal system, Solomon reminds us of one fact that transcends personal philosophy. Proof of guilt or innocence should be thorough, but once guilt has been determined, the sentence should be executed speedily. The longer delayed the sentence the more fully the criminal thinks he has escaped the consequences of his crime. Sadly, in our country's penal system the criminal is correct in his thinking. Often it would seem that the funds a man has to spend on an attorney has more to do with the outcome of his trial than the facts of his guilt or innocence. The principle of a speedy administration of justice, of imposing on the wrongdoer the consequences of his wrongs, lies at the heart of Solomon's lesson. This principle not only applies to criminal conduct against society, but it equally applies to individuals and our interpersonal relationships. When a person ignores reality (or in our increasingly post-Christian culture creates his own fantasy "reality"), we do him/her no favors to assist their self-delusional attitude that they have done no wrong, and thus have no consequences to face. There is a place for patience and longsuffering in the Christian worldview, but the role of these neglected virtues does not conflict with Solomon's principle of speedily bringing the consequences of a person's actions to bear upon his mind and liberty. Whether in the case of a criminal, a child in a loving home, or a brother or sister in a Bible believing Christian church, failure to live within the defined moral and ethical limits of God's Word reinforces a person's sinful inclinations. "Dr. Phil" in his daily television show typically deals with families in one crisis or another. He consistently reminds people that they reap the harvest of what they sowed, that their unhappy and failed relationships resulted from their own failures. He rather forcefully insists that people focus on their own faults, not blame others for their unhappiness and failures. In the case of children whose conduct has run out of control Dr. Phil often observes that the parents of these children adopted a faulty perspective of parenting. Quite frequently one of these parents will say, "I don't want to be a 'parent' to my child, I want to be his best friend." Dr. Phil will rebuke this populist attitude with "Your child needs a parent who has the courage to set boundaries and be a parent, not a parent who abandons that role." During an era in public education when the "open classroom" (the idea that you merely put information in the child's environment, but never impose structure and enforced homework and order onto the child) was in vogue, but obviously failing miserably, I was privileged to hear a leading educator make his case against this failed philosophy. In clear terms he said, "I gladly give children open choices. Do you want to do math this morning or this afternoon? But I will make doubly sure that their math has been done before the end of the school day!" Children, citizens, employees, and church members alike prefer a culture with clearly set boundaries and definitions of acceptable—and unacceptable—conduct. The only way any cultural unit can possibly fulfill this need is to first clearly state and define such conduct. However, a defined acceptable conduct that is not enforced is as futile and "fuzzy" as the "open" culture that never says anything about its expectations. Solomon reminds us clearly that, while human justice—or human expectations of personal conduct within moral, ethical, and acceptable limits—often fails, divine justice—and personal divine expectations—never fail. From our brief perspective, it may appear that the sinner is prospering in his sin, and the saint is suffering in his righteousness, Solomon anchors his thoughts, and ours, with a firm conviction, "...surely I know

that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him." In Scripture fearing God has almost nothing to do with the emotion of fear and everything to do with conduct that honors the one feared. If we fear God, we will order our lives according to His commandments and not according to our personal appetites and whims. Solomon injects an obvious tension into the passage. In one sentence he states that the sinner's days are "prolonged" in his sinful course, and in the very next sentence he says that the sinner cannot "prolong his days, which are as a shadow." Make a note; anytime you see such an obvious tension point, often in the form of an apparent contradiction (apparent only, not a real contradiction), stop and examine the lesson closely. This tension point aims to get our attention and to challenge us to probe deeper into the matter to understand something important. It doesn't take a lot of thought to conclude that Solomon in this passage is reminding us that the appearances of this life are not the final chapter in divine justice and judgment. Some sinners may well live and prosper throughout a long life ([Job 21:7-15](#) makes this point in significant detail.), but their long life is amazingly brief compared with the "time" that they shall face in divine judgment after their death. Regardless of the time delay, death is certain, and divine justice/judgment is equally certain. **D. A. Carson offers an instructive assessment of these verses.** "[Ec 8:12-13](#) The answer of faith. The wicked person's sin might be great (a hundred crimes) and his life long, but the viewpoint of faith says I know. (The "I saw" of [Ec 8:9](#) puts forward what all can see; the "I know" of [Ec 8:12](#) is a viewpoint not appreciated by everyone.) From one angle the wicked man lives a long time ([Ec 8:12](#)), yet the wicked person will not lengthen his days like a shadow. The contradiction hints that wickedness will not flourish beyond the grave, whereas the righteous will in some way flourish after death." [1] We are so dreadfully inclined to view present inequities as if they represent the final outcome of sin—and righteousness—but Solomon reminds us of our myopic view. God always gets the last word! While divine longsuffering prevails at the moment, Scripture repeatedly reminds us that God's judgment is certain, and cannot be thwarted or misguided as human justice often is.

Elder Joe Holder