

THE SOUL THAT SINS, IT SHALL DIE



I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant, and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless.

†ISAIAH 13:11

WHEN HE WAS FIVE YEARS OLD, my son came to me one day with a tearful confession: “Daddy, do you remember a long, long time ago, when the VCR broke? Please forgive me, Daddy; I’m the one who put that piece of plastic inside. I’m so sorry.”

I had known all along who was responsible for the problem with the video cassette recorder, yet my son’s confession brought me a great deal of joy. It was gratifying to see him owning up to his action and confessing that he had done wrong. I took him up into my lap, thanked him for being honest with me, and reassured him of my love and forgiveness. It never occurred to me to punish him for his action; it was more than sufficient that he had come clean.

It is tempting to extrapolate from this sort of everyday parental experience and develop a theology in which God’s only concern with our sin is with the harm it does to us or to our relationship with Him.

Isn't He, after all, a God of love? And doesn't He present Himself to us as a loving Father who, though He may at times chastise His children, does so only for their good?

In this view, God may well hate sin but always loves the sinner, and so His goal must always be to bring the sinner to repentance. If punishment can be of assistance in bringing about this repentance, then God in His love will punish. But He will punish only as long as is necessary to bring about the desired change. An everlasting punishment, or one with no reformative or preventive value, would be merely cruel and so cannot possibly be part of a loving God.

MACDONALD ON DIVINE PUNISHMENT

Destroying Sin

This is precisely the kind of theology George MacDonald preached. For him, God's justice was not His determination to punish sinners but to make them good: "Primarily, God is not bound to *punish* sin; He is bound to *destroy* sin. If He were not the Maker, He might not be bound to destroy sin—I do not know. But seeing He has created creatures who have sinned, and therefore sin has, by the creating act of God, come into the world, God is, in His own righteousness, bound to destroy sin."¹

MacDonald was not saying that God is the author of human sin, but that because He is our Father He can never be satisfied with anything less than our complete restoration to holiness. The traditional understanding of hell—that it consists of the everlasting punishment of the impenitent—was in MacDonald's view ridiculous and pernicious:

Take any of those wicked people in Dante's hell, and ask wherein is justice served by their punishment. Mind, I am not saying it is not right to punish them; I am saying that justice is not, never can be, satisfied by suffering—nay, cannot have any satisfaction in or from suffering. . . .

Such justice as Dante's keeps wickedness alive in its most terrible forms. The life of God goes forth to inform, or at least give a home to victorious evil. Is He not defeated every time that one of those lost souls defies Him? God is triumphantly defeated, I say, throughout the

hell of His vengeance. Although against evil, it is but the vain and wasted cruelty of a tyrant.²

It seemed evident to MacDonald that if God could not bring His creatures to repentance, His only possible option would be to annihilate them. Yet MacDonald was equally certain that this would not be necessary, but that one way or another—even by a punishment that would last for eons—God would have His way and restore all people to Himself.

Trying to Understand the Heart of God

Before criticizing MacDonald's views, we need to admit that they are attractive. There is indeed, for many Christians, real difficulty in accepting certain parts of the orthodox explanation of the gospel. Does God really view all people as sinners and hold them responsible for their sins, regardless of the opportunities they have had to learn of His truth? Does His justice really demand that *payment* be made for sins, such that we must either pay the price ourselves or else have it paid by Christ? Is it actually possible that someone *can* pay for another's wrongs? And does it make sense to think that a loving God would requite those whose sins are not paid for by Christ with a punishment that has no end and no power to reform?

These are serious and difficult questions, and a theology like MacDonald's, which angrily brushes them aside as based on grievous misunderstandings of the heart and mind of God, has deep emotional appeal. I would like very much to think that God views all people as His children. I would like to believe that the only punishment any person will receive is that which is tailored to promote his or her repentance. I would like to believe that all finally will be saved. I find, however, that the Bible keeps getting in my way.

MORE THAN A FATHER

The Biblical Principle of Being God's Child

The fundamental problem with MacDonald's theology is his insistence that the analogy of fatherhood provides a sufficient basis for

understanding God's relationship to human beings: "Men cannot, or will not, or dare not see that nothing but His being our Father gives Him any right over us—that nothing but that could give Him a perfect right."³ Scripture does not back him up at this point. While God is acknowledged to be the creator of all (Isa. 45:12) and the judge of all (Gen. 18:25), the analogy of the parent-child relationship is almost always restricted in the Bible to God's relationship with Jesus, His relationship with Israel, and His relationship with the individual Christian believer.

It is when we trust in Jesus that we are given the right to become children of God (John 1:12) and to speak to Him as children to a Father (Matt. 6:9). To be able to call ourselves His children is not our privilege by nature but a sign of the immense love that God has lavished on those He has chosen (1 John 3:1).

To be sure, God could not become the Father of believers if He were not inherently of a loving and fatherly character. And the psalmist affirms that God is "kind in all his works" (Ps. 145:17). But to say that God treats all people as His children goes far beyond the actual assertions of the Bible and undermines Scripture's teaching about the special status and privileges of believers.⁴

Sinners Before a Judge

But if human beings, apart from faith in Christ, do not stand before God in the relationship of children before a Father, then what is our status? The core biblical answer is that we stand before Him as sinners before a judge. Despite MacDonald's angry assertions to the contrary, and despite our own natural distaste for this aspect of the Bible's teaching, most of the language used in Scripture to describe our natural standing before God, as well as most of the language used to explain what Christ has done for those who believe, is *legal* language, the language not of the family but of the courtroom. Human beings are viewed in the Bible as convicted criminals awaiting a punishment that is both just and severe. God is presented—He presents Himself—as a judge who will by no means leave the guilty unpunished (Ex. 34:7) and as One who pours out wrath (not just corrective chastisement) on evildoers. And His ultimate answer to our plight is to inflict on Jesus the punishment that we ought to have had:

But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:5–6, emphasis added)

We will return shortly to develop this thought. Much hangs on our ability to see that God holds all people to be guilty of sin and deserving of punishment, *regardless of whether that punishment leads to repentance*. But first let us pause to note that while MacDonald's view of God is based upon a biblical truth and has a certain logical consistency to it, it can be maintained only by affirming that one truth at the expense of other truths also taught in the Bible. We are attracted to MacDonald's theology in part because of this very fact: It seems so logical, so self-consistent. But what if that logic is a faulty logic? What if God is bigger than that logic? What if He is, in fact, not *only* a father, but a father and more?

The truth, I believe, is that we can rightly understand God only if we forswear the temptation to draw our own extended conclusions from the analogies He gives us, and stick as close as possible to what He has actually said. MacDonald's ideas, according to one of the reviewers quoted on the back cover of my copy of MacDonald's sermons (*Creation in Christ*) have about them "a translucence, even a quality of radiating light." I would have to add that they also have about them a certain hubris. As we continue our inquiry into God's justice, we do well to keep in mind that the person who is esteemed by God is not the one who waxes eloquent as he develops one biblical idea to the detriment of others, but the one who is humble and contrite in spirit and who "trembles" at God's word (Isa. 66:2).

We may not always find it easy to reconcile the various truths of the Bible. Nevertheless, we must humbly keep in check both our desire for logical consistency and our outrage at truths we do not like. God will no doubt reward our search by giving us ever-greater insight into the relationships among the truths He has revealed about Himself. We may be quite sure that all that God does is, in fact, logical and self-consistent. But we should not presume to reject that which we have not had the patience or humility to accept on God's own terms.

THE WAGES OF SIN

We have said that apart from Christ, fallen human beings stand before God as convicted criminals deserving nothing more than punishment, and that God is not obligated to limit a sinner's punishment to that which will lead to his or her repentance. What is the biblical evidence for these assertions?

The evidence is overwhelming, so much so that it is hard to see how any serious student of the Bible could come to any other conclusion. It is plain, first of all, that all human beings are regarded as sinners: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23); "None is righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10); "God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes" (Eccl. 7:29).

The Bible's Statements of Our Liability

In addition, it is also plain that the commission of sin brings a just liability to punishment. This may be shown in several ways. First, there are explicit statements of the Scriptures. Consider these five:

The soul who sins shall die. (Ezekiel 18:4)

Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." (Matthew 25:41)

Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die. (Romans 1:32)

The wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23)

... inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. (2 Thessalonians 1:8)

Such statements can be multiplied, but these are sufficient to make the point. What is promised to sinners, as sinners, is *punishment*. There is in none of these statements any hint that the purpose of that punishment is the reformation of the sinner. The plain implication of them all is that sinners will be punished because it is *just* for them to be punished.

Our Liability Implied in Calls for Discipline and Punishment

A second way of proving that Scripture views all human beings as guilty of sin and liable to punishment is by observing the language used to describe God's attitude toward sin and sinners. We learn in Hebrews 12:5–11 that God “chastises” or “disciplines” those whom He regards as His children. This terminology is quite consistent with the idea that God uses hardships or troubles to promote the spiritual growth of Christians. But consider for a moment passages such as these: “I will take vengeance on my adversaries and will repay those who hate me” (Deut. 32:41); “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord” (Rom. 12:19); “But for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury” (Rom. 2:8); “For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” (Heb. 10:26–27).

This is hardly the language of fatherly reproof. As Jonathan Edwards wrote in his response to views similar to those later championed by George MacDonald, “To say that vengeance, wrath, fury, indignation, fiery indignation, wrath without mixture, mean a mere wholesome, fatherly discipline, designed for the good only of the subjects, is to say that the inspired writers were grossly ignorant of the proper and common use of language.”⁵

I think we must agree with Edwards. If God intended that we should understand from these passages that He punishes only to bring about repentance, one cannot help feeling that He expressed Himself very poorly. And if it should be argued that God threatens more than He actually delivers—that He uses the frightening terminology of *wrath*, *fury*, and *fire* only to move us to repentance but has in fact no intention of inflicting such punishment—then we must ask whether God really is so weak that He cannot get His way without making empty threats. No, the clear implication of these passages is that God fully intends to punish sinners, and there is nothing at all to suggest that the punishment is reformatory in nature.

We may go further. The universal guilt and liability to punishment of human beings is implied in all that is said in Scripture about salvation. If we do not deserve punishment, then it should be possible

for us to be saved on the basis of justice rather than mercy. Indeed, we should not have to speak of being “saved” at all, since the idea of salvation implies that we are justly exposed to something bad. Because of our sins, we are subject to God’s wrath (Eph. 2:3; Rom. 5:9). Because of our inability to keep God’s Law, we stand under a curse (Gal. 3:10).

It is because we are guilty—because we have no right to expect anything from God but punishment—that we speak of redemption through Christ as a work of mercy and grace.

Punishment and Repentance

But perhaps we may introduce an objection at this point: Even if we concede that all human beings deserve punishment from God, can’t we still hold to the idea that the punishment they deserve is nothing more nor less than that which God, in His divine wisdom, knows will bring them to repentance? In other words, perhaps we may retain our conception of God as always working for the restoration of people, even while we admit the justice of divine wrath. Could we not even agree with MacDonald that it is *because* the punishment is intended for the sinner’s good that it may be called just?

I do not believe we can. Note first that this whole line of reasoning, which sees divine punishment as intended for the sinner’s good, is foreign to the passages we have already considered. Nor does such reasoning address those passages that declare people who die impenitent are “thrown away,” “lost,” “destroyed,” or that they “suffer the punishment of eternal destruction” (Matt. 13:48; Luke 9:25; John 17:12; Matt. 10:28; Heb. 10:39; 2 Peter 3:7; 2 Thess. 1:9). Although it comes naturally to us to hope that all divine punishment is disciplinary in nature, the Bible does not give us much encouragement in that direction.

Furthermore, the moment we assert that the punishment or curse threatened to the unrepentant is the very thing needed to bring the person to repentance and faith, we find ourselves in impossible logical difficulties; since this implies that Christ died to save sinners from the one thing (punishment) that can bring about their salvation. Indeed, it would not make sense to call a disciplinary punishment a “curse” at all; we should instead call it a blessing and say that Christ

saves some people (who repent in this lifetime) by delivering them from the curse and saves all others by inflicting the curse on them! But there is, of course, nothing in the New Testament of any such double work of Christ; we are told only that He came to redeem “us” (believers) from the curse (Gal. 3:13).

The logical problems deepen. If we say that the *only* punishment that a sinner deserves is that which will bring him to repentance, then we must admit that after he has suffered that punishment and repented, he must be admitted to heaven on the basis of justice rather than of mercy. Any further punishment beyond that point would be unjust. Yet the Bible says nothing of a salvation that is earned or secured through suffering: It is by grace alone that anyone can be admitted to eternal joy. MacDonald’s position is hopeless.

WHY DOES GOD PUNISH SIN?

I do not see any alternative but to believe that God punishes sin because sin deserves punishment. It is *just* for Him to punish sin, and because it is just, there is no need to add the element of reformation or discipline in order to make it just.

MacDonald writes, “Primarily, God is not bound to *punish* sin; He is bound to *destroy* sin.” But where is the biblical proof of this assertion? MacDonald’s problem is that he cannot see any good coming out of punishment that does not reform. Punishment cannot undo the sin or make atonement for the wrong done; if it also cannot effect a change in the one being punished, then a good God would respond by annihilating the sinner. To continue the punishment with no hope of its ever bringing about good would be pointless.

In part we must agree with MacDonald. If there really is *no* good to be derived from the punishment of the wicked, then it is hard to see how such punishment could ever be considered just. It does not follow, however, that the good that comes from the punishment of the wicked must be a good *to them*. What if God punishes the wicked (whose deeds deserve punishment) for the good that comes thereby to the universe as a whole? Suppose that through their punishment God displays His holiness and authority, and enhances the joy of the redeemed by drawing attention to the greatness of His mercy toward them.

This would seem to be the point of Romans 9:22–23: “What if

God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory . . . ?” In this case, those being punished do not derive any good from their punishment, but the universe as a whole does.

Crime and Punishment

Perhaps we can clarify this idea by thinking for a moment about human justice. Some believe the state should not punish wrongdoers unless by so doing it can either bring about their reformation or protect the community from further injury. In most people, however, there is an ineradicable notion that underlying these two legitimate aims of punishment is a deeper and more basic one, namely, the fact that bad deeds *deserve* punishment. They believe that in inflicting punishment the state is making an important and necessary moral statement. Of course, our sense of justice can easily be corrupted by something lower, such as bloodthirstiness or a desire for revenge. But even so, when a criminal is punished and people express pleasure and say, “Justice has been served,” they are generally saying more than that their personal feelings have been satisfied; they are saying that in some significant way the moral order and the authority of the state and the law have been upheld.

In the same way, God’s punishment of the wicked can be said to “glorify” Him: It reveals His character, reinforces the sanctity of the moral law that has been broken, and counterbalances the damage done to His honor and majesty by the disobedience of His creatures. As such, the punishment of the wicked is good in and of itself, regardless of whether it results in their repentance and salvation.⁶

Punishment Delayed

For the biblical writers, and especially the psalmists, the real problem of God’s justice is not why He punishes the wicked but why He is taking so long to do so! When the authors of the Psalms cry out for justice, they are crying for God to end His patient endurance of evil and wreak vengeance on His enemies:

How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?

Is the enemy to revile your name forever?

Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand?

Take it from the fold of your garment and destroy them! (Psalm 74:10–11)

We may well feel nervous about praying such prayers ourselves, knowing how easily we can confuse God's cause with our own and how readily we sin against the biblical command to love our enemies. The point, however, is that the idea that God cannot justly punish without simultaneously reforming is alien to the Bible, while the notion that wickedness deserves God's wrath is found all the way from Genesis to Revelation.

HOW DID WE GET INTO THIS MESS?

For three years in the early 1980s, I taught English at a university in Taiwan, and for a portion of that time I had the opportunity to teach the Bible to English majors. One of the most interesting and revealing moments in my first Bible class came while we were discussing the story of Adam and Eve. My students wanted to know why the first couple disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit. I could answer only that they really had no reason to do so; God had clearly warned them of the consequences of such a deed, and they had nothing to gain and everything to lose by sinning. Their action was completely without any possible justification.

My students, dissatisfied and approaching the problem from a background of Confucian morality, saw the matter quite differently: They insisted that the Fall must properly be blamed not on Adam and Eve but on God. If God had rightly educated His creatures, they reasoned, then the first couple never would have sinned; the fact that they did sin was proof that God had failed in His responsibility to His pupils.

This response to the Fall left me dumbfounded, yet as I thought about it later, I realized that it was not entirely unlike my attitude toward God's justice as a whole. Surely God could have prevented Adam and Eve from sinning, I thought. And if He could, shouldn't He have? Somehow it did not seem fair for Him to hold me responsible for my sin when I never had a choice about being born a sinner!

Was not God in some way responsible for making me what I am, I reasoned, and shouldn't He bear the guilt of the things I do wrong? It seems once we admit that we are sinners and that as sinners we deserve punishment, we begin to look for a way of shifting blame to God.

An Outcome of Our Evolution?

Of course, for many modern people (and the overwhelming majority of liberal theologians), the problem itself is not to be taken seriously. They assume that modern scientific knowledge of the origins of the human race has rendered obsolete the whole story of Adam, Eve, and the Fall; and they insist that we must instead understand human "fallenness" as reflecting our evolutionary heritage.⁷ That is, we are selfish, dishonest, proud, ruthless, lustful, and murderous; not because our first ancestor disobeyed God, but because a whole chain of ancestors were helped by those traits to survive and reproduce.

Although we need not include here an extended discussion of the difficult scientific and theological issues raised by the question of the Fall, a couple of points may be in order. First, scientists know much less than many people seem to think they do about the origins of our race. The study of skeletal remains will never tell us whether their owners were fully human, created in the image of God as we are; nor will it reveal to us anything about their innocence or guilt before God. The naturalistic assumptions that underlie much scientific study of human origins may make the biblical account of an original innocence *seem* implausible, but it is most unlikely that paleontology can ever either prove or disprove its truth.⁸ Those who have accepted the Bible's authority and trustworthiness⁹ on other grounds have no reason to abandon its teaching at this point.

The Reality of the Fall

Second, the biblical account of a real, historical fall into sin is so intimately tied to the rest of the Christian faith that its abandonment is disastrous. If we can no longer believe Paul when he tells us that sin and death entered the human race through one man, then why should

we believe him when he tells us that now God's grace overflows to the many through Christ, the second Adam (see Rom. 5:12–19)?

Even more seriously, if our present sinful state is not the result of the Fall but is simply the condition in which God made us, then our problems with His justice become truly intolerable. As hard as it may be to understand why He allowed the whole human race to incur guilt and fall into a sinful condition as a result of the sin of one man, it is harder still to see how He could justly *create* us as sinners and still hold us responsible for our own actions. It is no coincidence that theologians who abandon the idea of the Fall generally also move either to depersonalize God or to strip Him of His omnipotence, viewing Him as a power or process that is on the side of good but is limited in its ability to achieve good. This kind of theological shift results naturally from the realization that the fully personal and all-powerful God of the Bible simply cannot be conceived of as having created us in our present state of sin and suffering.

Adam's Fall and Our Fall

As problematic as we may feel it to be, the traditional understanding is the best. God created humankind good, and through the disobedience of the first man we tumbled into our present wretchedness. Theologians have debated at great length the manner in which we can be said to have fallen “in Adam,” but the details of the debate are not important here.¹⁰ However we may explain our relationship to Adam, the uncomfortable facts with which we must deal are the following.

First, *we are involved in Adam's punishment*. The punishment of Adam's disobedience was to be death, and death—both physical and spiritual, meaning separation from God—has been the lot of all human beings since. Even infants and babies in the womb, who cannot be thought to have yet committed any sins of their own, are subject to physical death.

It is not going too far to say that the entire human race thus participates in the punishment of Adam for his first act of disobedience to God. And we participate not only in his punishment but also in his guilt; according to Romans 5:12, when Adam sinned we all sinned. He represented all of us, and we are held accountable for his disobedience. We share the guilt of his sin.

Second, Adam's sin has resulted in the corruption of our nature, so that *we arrive in this world as sinners*. "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5). Unless God intervenes to counteract our natural tendency, we live our entire lives in a state of rebellion against God, thereby adding daily to our guilt before Him or, as Paul puts it, "storing up wrath" against ourselves for the day of judgment (Rom. 2:5). Because the natural human being does not know or love God or live for His glory, even our good acts—our "righteous deeds"—are like a filthy garment before Him (Isa. 64:6), and we increase in guilt even as we perform them.

At an experiential level, this does not create a great problem for most Christians. *We know* we are guilty before God; we feel in our hearts that it is right for God to disapprove of our deeds. The difficulty comes when we try to explain how it is that we came to be in this condition in the first place. Surely it is unfair that God brought all of us into this miserable state because of the sin of just one man! Why does God not give each human being the same chance at remaining righteous that He gave to Adam? Why did He so ordain it that you and I should come into the world incapable of pleasing Him by our behavior?

I confess that I have not found a fully satisfying answer to that question, nor do I expect to find it in this life. In the end I fall back on my confidence that "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). If an all-wise and perfectly benevolent Creator decided to let the future happiness of the human race hang on the behavior of our first ancestor, then we may be sure that this was the right thing to do, however much we may imagine that we could have come up with a better plan. It is, in any event, plain that our sins are indeed ours; we cannot hold God responsible for them, nor, when we are thinking straight, do we have any real desire to. We reproach ourselves for our sins and blame others for theirs. As mysterious as our existence as sinners may be to us, it is inextricably bound up with our humanness that we be treated like the morally responsible beings we are.¹¹

Blaise Pascal expressed the matter well when he wrote:

Without doubt nothing is more shocking to our reason than to say that the sin of the first man has implicated in its guilt men so far from the original sin that they seem incapable of sharing it. . . . Certainly

nothing jolts us more rudely than this doctrine, and yet, but for this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we remain incomprehensible to ourselves.¹²

Pascal is absolutely right: The doctrine of the Fall is a hard doctrine to accept, but without it we find it impossible to make moral and intellectual sense of the human condition.

Why Didn't God Stop Adam from Taking the Fruit?

The question of my Chinese students in Taiwan raises one more issue that must be considered briefly before we move on. Even if we grant God's wisdom in binding up the fortunes of the human race with the behavior of Adam, can't we still fault God for allowing Adam to sin? That is, given that God is all-powerful and all-knowing, couldn't He have created Adam and Eve in such a way that they would not fall? To press the issue still further, why, if God hoped they would remain righteous, did He subject them to temptation in the first place? Surely He could have created a garden devoid of forbidden fruit, and kept the serpent out of it!

The answer most commonly given to questions of this sort is that even an all-powerful Creator cannot create a genuinely free being unless He provides the being with the chance to misuse that freedom. If God had (1) given Adam and Eve no opportunity to sin, or (2) given them natures not susceptible to temptation, or (3) intervened the moment their wills started to move in the wrong direction, then He would effectively have undermined His own highest goal in their creation. That goal was the making of creatures who would give their love to Him by deliberate choice. The creation of man was a gamble that God lost.

I find this answer somewhat helpful but incomplete. Yes, it is certainly the case that the redeemed will love God more for having made a deliberate choice to do so. Also, as I will argue later in the book, a universe in which evil has been allowed temporary sway will in the long run be a richer universe than one that has never fallen. Still, the argument under consideration has great problems. It seems to imply that real freedom is incompatible with an inability to sin, which in turn suggests that even in heaven the saints will be capable

of falling. However, all of the Christian tradition has denied that possibility; it is agreed that in heaven the redeemed will be “confirmed” in holiness—that is, they will be brought beyond even the possibility of sin. But if that is possible in heaven, then why was it not possible in the garden? How can it be that God is able to keep countless millions of redeemed human beings and unfallen angels in an eternally holy state in heaven without violating their freedom, but He was incapable of doing the same for Adam and Eve in Eden?¹³

There is another problem with saying that God was incapable of creating free beings who would freely and infallibly choose not to sin. Such a doctrine turns the entire story of the human race, including the Incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, into a sort of divine “Plan B,” God’s effort to bring some good out of a creation spinning out of His control. This is not compatible with the Bible’s presentation of God as the One who works out all things in conformity with the purpose of His will (Eph. 1) and who makes known the end of all things before their beginning (Isa. 46:10). I do not believe the Bible permits us to say either that the Fall took God by surprise or that He lacked the power to prevent it.

God’s Sovereignty over Evil

Indeed, I do not see how we can avoid the conclusion that the Fall was ordained by God to subserve the overall good of His creation. Of course there is difficulty in this view: It comes dangerously close to saying that God is the author of evil. But this is a problem—perhaps we should say a mystery—that runs throughout the Bible. Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery, but Joseph claimed they were just fulfilling God’s purpose (Gen. 45:5–7). Pharaoh held the Israelites in bondage, but God hardened Pharaoh’s heart (Ex. 9:12). The Assyrians and Babylonians treated God’s people and His temple with disdain and cruelty, but the Bible says that God raised them up for that purpose and “whistle[d] for them from the ends of the earth” (Isa. 5:25–30; cf. 45:1–7). Judas, Caiaphas, Pilate, and the Roman soldiers betrayed, tortured, and crucified Jesus; yet they acted according to God’s “definite plan and foreknowledge” and did only what His hand had “predestined to take place” (Acts 2:23; 4:28).

In other words, while God cannot sin, nor does He tempt people

to sin (James 1:13), in some mysterious fashion He ordains our sins and uses them in the fulfillment of His great plan for the creation.¹⁴ God certainly did not force or entice Adam and Eve to disobey Him. But He did determine to allow them to do so. As we shall see in chapter 9, His decision to do so appears to proceed from His desire to make the fullest possible manifestation of His merciful character toward His redeemed people.

IS GOD HARSH?

Thinking of God as Unjust and Harsh

Perhaps it will seem to some Christians that in speaking so much of human guilt before God I have merely belabored the obvious. There is a reason for doing so, however. We human beings have a tendency to give lip service to the truth that we deserve divine wrath and then immediately turn around and insist on our “rights” before God. It is unjust, we think, if God does not give all people an opportunity to hear of Christ. Further, it is unjust if He punishes unbelievers in hell.

It is unjust if He makes distinctions between people, giving to one person the ability to repent and believe while withholding it from another.

It is unjust, we suppose, if God allows us to suffer all manner of troubles and pains in this life.

Without a deep and heartfelt recognition of our ill desert before God, we also find parts of the Bible incomprehensibly harsh. How could God order the destruction of the Canaanites, including their babies and small children? How could He repay the grumbling of the Israelites in the desert with plague and the opening of the earth? Why should Ananias and Sapphira have died for the telling of a very small lie to the church?

The answer is that no human being is innocent before God, and, thus, no human being deserves His love and mercy. When this fact is finally grasped, one’s entire outlook changes. It is no longer strange that God condemned the Canaanites; what is strange is that He allowed the people of Israel to live. It is not strange that we live in a world of suffering and difficulty; what surprises us is that God permits us to remain in His world at all.

The continued existence of sinful creatures like us is itself a sign of God's forbearance. If we deny our guilt before God and the fact that we genuinely deserve punishment from Him, then we will always be offended by His judgments. If we admit that we deserve nothing *but* punishment from Him, we will be amazed by His patience.

Does God Enjoy Punishing People?

But doesn't this still make God out to be very vindictive? I do not think so. The Bible does not present God as delighting in punishing the wicked; on the contrary, we are shown repeatedly that the heart of the Lord is mercy. God desires to be kind to people everywhere; in fact, He is at all times expressing that kindness in manifold ways, even to those who do not know Him. He makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the unjust as well as the just (Matt. 5:45); He is "kind in all his works" (Ps. 145:13, 17).

What is in question here, however, is not the character of God but the legal status of fallen humanity before God. And our status is that of criminals, who deserve nothing less than to be punished according to the full extent of the law. God is at liberty to show mercy. But His mercy can be truly understood only against the background of His justice. Until we see this, we will make no progress in our effort to make sense of His dealings with human beings.

Let us put it simply and clearly. According to the Bible, human beings do not deserve good from God; we deserve death and hell. And because that is what we deserve, God would be acting justly if He brought that penalty upon us. If God had not designed any way by which we could be forgiven and saved but had instead determined to deal with the entire human race according to the strictest justice, nobody would have any right to complain against Him. In the next chapter we must look deeply into the severity of God's justice, in order to understand the punishment that is threatened to and will, in fact, be inflicted on those who do not repent and believe.

JUSTICE AND WRATH

First, though, let us consider one more possible objection. Some might dispute the claim that the language applied by the Bible to the

standing of fallen men and women before God is mostly *legal* language. Surely the Bible speaks far more personally when it describes God as “wrathful,” bent on vengeance, or angry at the wicked all day long. And this may make us feel that the God of the Bible is less interested in justice than in avenging Himself on His personal enemies. This God seems temperamental, vindictive, and cruel. There are many who feel that the Bible is an archaic and frightening document that can no longer serve to teach modern people the meaning of justice.

Enemies of God’s Law and of God Himself

The answer is found in recognizing that those who are the enemies of God are the enemies of His Law; and those who hate His Law are also those who hate God Himself. When the Bible speaks of human guilt and divine justice, it is viewing the matter from the perspective of God as the Lawgiver. When the Bible speaks of God’s wrath, it is viewing the same problem—the human rejection of God’s will—from the perspective of God as prosecutor or even as victim. In human law the lawgiver and the prosecutor are not generally the same person, nor is it normal for the lawgiver to be the person who has been harmed by a particular crime. But in the case of God, the Lawgiver, the prosecutor of the guilty, and the ultimate object of the sins of the guilty are all one and the same.

God personally determined the rules for human life. God personally is offended and dishonored when those rules are broken. God personally intends to vindicate His Law and His person by avenging Himself on those who have sinned.

In human legal systems, we would attempt at all costs to avoid such a confusion of roles, due to our human inability to be fair and objective about matters concerning our own dignity. If another person harms me, it is not at all wise for the court to allow me to try and convict that person on my own authority; I would be far too likely to act out of motives falling short of a true love of justice. God, however, is incapable of error or sin. If He is indignant toward human sin, it is because indignation—and the punishment to which it leads—is the appropriate and just response to that sin. God’s Law, His response to violations of His Law, and His judicial treatment of those who violate His Law, are all in perfect accord with His own nature, a

nature in which there is all light and no darkness, in which there exist both perfect knowledge and perfect justice.

In God, in other words, are combined the perfect legislator, the perfect prosecutor, and the perfect crime victim, which means that God's wrath and indignation will always be utterly just, because they will be in perfect proportion to the heinousness of sin.

Wrath That Rises from God's Trampled Law

Nevertheless, of the two concepts, wrath and justice, I suggest we do well to think of justice as the more primary. That is to say, God is angry because of the breaking of His Law.

Putting matters this way better prepares us to understand the cross of Christ. In the atoning death of Jesus we see God—who from one point of view may be said to be angry with sinners or even to hate them—acting decisively to save and forgive them. Their violations of His Law enrage Him, but behind that rage there is a love toward the people themselves. It would be a little strange to say that God simultaneously hates and loves people, but it is not strange at all to say that He loves people yet hates their lawbreaking.

The value of keeping justice as the more primary issue is that it puts the focus on the sinner's guilt rather than on God's anger toward the sinner.

Moreover, the Atonement is presented in the Bible primarily in legal terms. Look once more at Isaiah 53:5–6:

But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Or again, at Romans 3:25–26:

God put forward [Christ Jesus] as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

The emphasis in both of these passages is on Christ's death as a satisfaction of penal justice. Christ died for our sins. He died to vindicate divine justice. He died to take on Himself the punishment that justly belonged to us. We shall have more to say on this topic in chapter 7.

Father, You have shown me clearly that all human beings are guilty before You, and so You are obligated to none. If You save us, it is solely by Your mercy, and not because any demands of justice constrain You. Yet why is it that almost as often as I review these facts, I find my heart rising up in rebellion against them? Why do I still find it hard to be at peace with these truths that are so central to the Christian faith? Why does my heart continue to assert that You are at fault for allowing me to be born into a world of sin, incapable of not sinning, and then holding me accountable for my sin?

Please subdue my rebellious, prideful heart. Make me willing to accept the truth that my salvation is by grace alone and that You would have done no damage to Your upright and holy character had You chosen to leave me in my guilt. And grant that those who read this book may recognize Your goodness in sending Christ, who alone can make propitiation for their sins. May they run to Him for deliverance from their sins. In Jesus' name, amen.

NOTES

1. George MacDonald, *Creation in Christ*, ed. Rolland Hein (Wheaton, Ill.: Shaw, 1976), 69.
2. *Ibid.*, 71.
3. *Ibid.*, 80–81.
4. We are often told that it is Jesus who has taught us to view God as the Father of all human beings, but as D. A. Carson has pointed out, “The ‘fatherhood of God’ theme as applied to all human beings everywhere, so much a staple of classic liberal theology, is not supported by a single text from the canonical Gospels”; D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 302.
5. Jonathan Edwards, *The Salvation of All Men Strictly Examined; and the Endless Punishment of Those who Die Impenitent, Argued and Defended Against the Objections and Reasonings of the Late Rev. Doctor Chauncy, of Boston, in His Book Entitled “The Salvation of All Men,” Etc.*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Ewer & Bedlington, 1824), 74.
6. In fact, unless a punishment is just in and of itself, its imposition solely for the purposes of either deterrence or reformation is an act of injustice. See C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 94.
7. See, for example, John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), chapter 8.

8. For a critical review of modern views of human prehistory, see Sigrid Hartwig-Scherer, "Apes or Ancestors? Interpretations of the Hominid Fossil Record Within Evolutionary & Basic Type Biology," in William A. Dembski, ed., *Mere Creation: Science, Faith & Intelligent Design* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1998), 212–35. A more thorough discussion of the reasons for holding to a biblical view of human origins can be found in R. C. Sproul, *Chosen By God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1986), 79–84.
9. While a commitment to the Scriptures as the ultimate authority for knowledge of God is commonplace among evangelicals, in the current overall theological atmosphere it calls for some defense. I adhere to the understanding of Scripture's teaching about itself that was expressed so eloquently by B. B. Warfield in his *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*. It seems crystal clear that Jesus and His disciples believed and taught that the Bible is to be read as the written Word of God. We have no reason to trust any other doctrines taught by Christ and His apostles if we find ourselves unwilling to trust this one. Second, while an attempt to understand the backgrounds and literary prehistory of the biblical books is legitimate, much "higher criticism" has moved off into a realm of complete subjectivity, in which claims are made that cannot possibly be substantiated and in which the assertions of each generation of scholars are refuted by their own students. Finally, it seems plain to me that if the Bible is *not* inspired and authoritative, then we should be honest enough to admit that we have no sure knowledge of God whatsoever. All contemporary liberal theology denies this, but the complete fragmentation of the field of theology is proof that the assertion is true.
10. A good introduction to the topic is John Murray's *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959). A less technical discussion can be found in Sproul, *Chosen By God*, 84–99.
11. As John Stott wrote, "Our responsibility before God is an inalienable aspect of our human dignity. Its final expression will be on the day of judgment. Nobody will be sentenced without trial. All people, great and small, irrespective of their social class, will stand before God's throne, not crushed or browbeaten, but given this final token of respect for human responsibility, as each gives an account of what he or she has done." John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1986), 95–96.
12. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* 1.7.31 (London: Penguin, 1995), 35–36.
13. In "Miscellaneous Remarks Concerning the Divine Decrees, Etc.," Jonathan Edwards wrote, "Objectors to the doctrine of election may say, God cannot always preserve men from sinning, unless he destroys their liberty. But will they deny that an omnipotent, an infinitely wise God, could possibly invent and set before men such strong motives to obedience, and keep them before them in such a manner, as should influence them to continue in their obedience, as the elect angels have done, without destroying their liberty? God will order it so that the saints and angels in heaven never will sin, and does it therefore follow that their liberty is destroyed, and that they are not free, but forced in their actions?" Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, rev. Edward Hickman (1834; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), 541.

14. I do not think this truth has ever been better summarized than in the third chapter of the Westminster Confession: “God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty of contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.” *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian, 1973), chap. 3, art. 1.