

Does God Still Punish Sin?

By Shawn Lazar

After the heartbreaking devastation in Moore, OK, David P. Scaer,¹ released a short message entitled, “Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People.”² In it, he made a startling claim:

Tragedies, even massive ones caused by tornadoes, are not signs of God’s displeasure over sin...Evangelical preachers who even suggest that God is carrying out vengeance on sin do not hold that Christ made atonement for all sin.

If Scaer had said that we shouldn’t rush to judge whether God intended to destroy Moore, or that it is difficult to make a one-to-one correspondence between a particular tragedy and a particular sin, or that our suffering is not a clear reflection of God’s will for us, I would have been sympathetic. But Scaer is saying something much stronger.

He is claiming that tragedies are *never* signs of God’s displeasure, that after the cross God no longer punishes sin, and anyone who teaches otherwise denies the atonement.

Is it true that God doesn’t carry out vengeance on sin? What is Scaer’s Biblical evidence?

SIN AND DESTRUCTION (LUKE 13:1-5)

Scaer appeals to Luke 13:4. This is the famous passage about the Tower of Siloam. After paraphrasing it (by applying it to the residents of Moore), Scaer makes the claim that, “Tragedies...are not signs of God’s displeasure over sin...”

Before we accept what Scaer says, let’s look at the whole passage and decide whether his conclusion is warranted by the text.

There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, “Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.”

Scaer concludes from this passage that tragedies are not signs of God’s displeasure. Where does he get that idea?

Here, Jesus was told about a tragedy involving **Galileans** who had gone up to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple, and were put to death by **Pilate**. Consequently, their blood was **mingled with their sacrifices**, suggesting a particularly gruesome end.

And what was Jesus' response to this news? Did He deny a connection between their sins and their fate? Not at all. He took the Galileans sinfulness for granted, and warned the Jerusalemites, that unless they repented, they would **likewise perish**. In other words, unless they turned from their sins, they would die too.

The Lord then presented another tragic example involving **eighteen** people being crushed under **the tower in Siloam**, in south Jerusalem. Again, He implied they were sinners, no worse **than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem**, and proceeded to repeat His warning, that unless the Jerusalemites repented of their sins, they should expect to **perish**.

It is puzzling that Scaer would ever think to use this text to *deny* that God still punishes sin, and to conclude that even *suggesting* "that God is carrying out vengeance on sin" is wrong. His conclusion is starkly contradicted by Jesus' own warning to the people living in Jerusalem that their sins (and especially their rejection of Jesus) would lead to disaster and death.

SIN AND INTROSPECTION (1 COR 11:27-32)

Scaer believes his understanding of God's role in natural disasters has some practical pastoral applications. He writes,

For a moment let's think about a popular view that misfortune, especially serious illnesses, should be viewed as God's punishment for sin. So consequently, the afflicted person is asked to search his/her soul to discover the sin that brought about such evil. This spiritual exercise, if we dare call it this, is that the afflicted person is asked to repent. *Such an approach is dreadfully wrong*, especially in pastoral care, not only because it is a blatant denial of the central Christian teaching of vicarious atonement that Christ has suffered the guilt and consequences of both original sin and all actual sins, but the afflicted person may come to believe that he or she has committed an unforgivable sin (italics added).

Since Scaer denies that God punishes sin after the cross, it is only natural that he would also deny it is pastorally sound to ask people to search their own lives, to see if their suffering is connected with personal sin. Scaer thinks such an approach "is dreadfully wrong" and "a blatant denial of... vicarious atonement." Is there any Biblical evidence for these conclusions? He offers none. Indeed, Scaer's claim is contradicted by clear Biblical teaching.

Let's turn to Paul's letter to the Corinthians, where he discusses the celebration of the Lord's Supper,

Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world (1 Cor 11:27-32).

Here we find that the Corinthians were mishandling (even abusing) the Lord's Supper. They were divided into factions (1 Cor 11:19). They were eating ahead of each other (v 21). Some were even getting drunk (v 21b). Most of all, they were not discerning the Lord's body (v 29). So Paul warned them that whoever partook of the bread and wine **in an unworthy manner** would be **guilty of the body and blood of the Lord**, and would thereby drink **judgment to himself**.

And what were the consequences of their actions? Paul explained the result was that many of the Corinthians were **weak and sick**, and some even died because of it (i.e., **many sleep**).

In other words, in Paul's mind there was a clear causal connection between sinning and being punished with sickness and death. And it is precisely because of this connection that he admonished the Corinthians to **examine** themselves to see if they approached the Supper in a respectful or sinful manner.

It is important to **judge ourselves**, Paul explains, so as to avoid God's temporal judgment. If we do not judge ourselves, then God will judge us. If we do not repent of our own accord, we can expect to be **chastened by the Lord**, precisely so that we will not be **condemned with the world**.

Paul is not here referring to eternal condemnation. Believers have everlasting life, and the promise they will never perish, so they need not fear God's *eternal* wrath. Rather, the condemnation Paul has in mind is the *temporal* afflictions of weakness, sickness, and death that was evident among the Corinthians. God condemns the world with that kind of temporal punishment, but believers need not be a part of it. Believers are disciplined, like children. This is not contrary to His love, but part of it.

The author of Hebrews had this to say about the relationship between God's love and His chastisement:

And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons:

*"My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord,
Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him;
For whom the Lord loves He chastens,
And scourges every son whom He receives."*

If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? (Heb 12:4-7)

Hebrews clearly says that believers are chastened, rebuked, and even scourged by God. And this is for our good, because we are loved as sons.

Still, it is better to examine ourselves for personal sin, and repent, to avoid such chastisement.

Scaer may think that is dreadfully wrong, but God's Word says otherwise.

FEAR OF LOSING ONE'S SALVATION

One of the reasons why Scaer says we should not counsel people to examine their own sins in the midst of tragedy is because "the afflicted person may come to believe that he or she has committed an unforgivable sin."

It is not quite clear what Scaer means by that kind of fear. Since Lutherans teach that eternal salvation can be lost, maybe Scaer is concerned that people will take their suffering as evidence that they have committed an unforgivable sin that either causes them to lose their salvation or that proves they were never truly saved to begin with.

In that case, the solution is not to deny the Biblical connection between sin and tragedy, but to stop preaching a false gospel. Instead, we should preach the true message of free grace, i.e., that all who believe in Jesus will have everlasting life and will *never* eternally perish (John 3:16). Believers can thereby know that they are eternally secure. And so, there is no sin or judgment they can undergo that will call their eternal destiny into question. Believers can know that they will be with God forever, despite the personal tragedies they may undergo in the here and now.

But the solution must also include the explanation that sin still has dire consequences in this life. Believers cannot perish eternally, but they can and will perish temporally. And in the life to come they can experience the loss of rewards (1 Cor 3:12-15). I would urge Lutherans like Scaer to study the Biblical distinctions between eternal life and eternal rewards, eternal perishing and temporal perishing, and between eternal judgment and temporal judgment.

CONCLUSION

Let me emphasize that I am not passing judgment on the people of Moore, OK. Nor am I saying that every illness or personal tragedy is a punishment for sin. I am strictly replying to the claim that God no longer punishes sin, and it is wrong to suggest that He does.

Although we should not be too quick to judge whether a particular affliction or tragedy is due to God's judgment on personal sin, we cannot dogmatically rule out that possibility. There is not a shred of Biblical evidence to support the idea that God no longer punishes sin.

The sobering truth is, God does punish sin with tragedy, including sickness and death, out of love for believers. And as Paul taught the Corinthians, the way to avoid God's chastisement is to examine ourselves and repent of the sins we find, lest we be condemned with the world.

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1. Professor of Systematic Theology and New Testament at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, IN.
2. It can be found here: <http://www.ctsfw.edu/document.doc?id=1022>.