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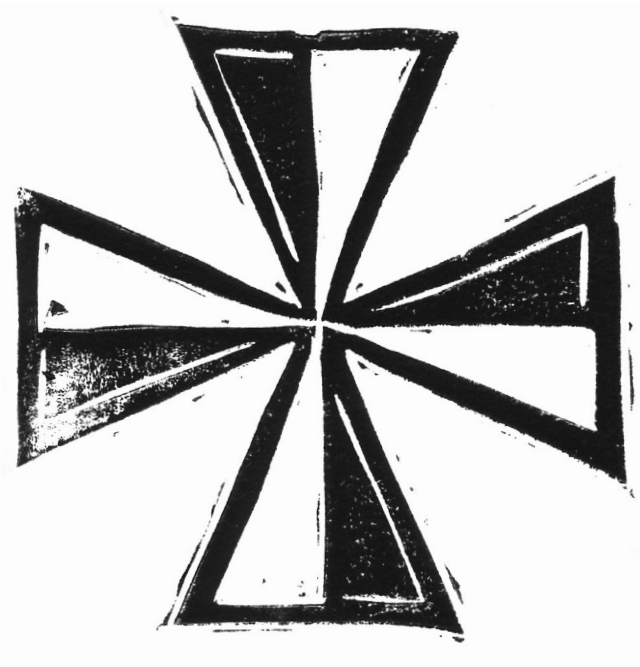

REDEMPTIVE REVERSALS

AND THE IRONIC OVERTURNING OF HUMAN WISDOM

G. K. BEALE

"The apostle Paul said that the gospel was foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews. The gospel is just as scandalous and surprising today—or to use Greg Beale's term, *ironic*. To encounter that irony is to stumble into strong evidence of the gospel's divinity. Beale does a masterful job of directing us to a powerful internal testimony the Scripture gives of its truthfulness. Furthermore, *Redemptive Reversals* is overflowing with anecdotal illustrations, pastoral cautions, cultural connections, and practical applications. It's a refreshing, unique, and important book all serious Bible students should have in their library."

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G. K. Beale

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To Lynn, Frank, and Helen Garrott,
pilgrims who have walked the ironic cruciform path of our Lord

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Foreword

A Most Unlikely Revival

I asked my longtime friend Andrew White to write a foreword. Andrew is a medical doctor and former student of mine from when I taught at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He is an excellent doctor and perceptive theologian. The true story he tells here exemplifies many of the ideas in this book.

My story is thirty-seven years old, yet every time I tell it (which is often), my listeners encourage me to tell it to more people, using mass media. Greg Beale and his wife, Dorinda, have been the most persistent and persuasive listeners. So I am finally putting to pen a personal, historical account of a spiritual revival in 1980 among the Khmer Rouge in a refugee camp at the Thailand/Cambodia border called Sa Kaeo. This story is amazing because a revival was so unlikely for two reasons: (1) The Khmer Rouge (many of whom were converted in the revival) had been vicious murderers in the Cambodian genocide of the 1970s. That genocide had a greater percentage

of the population killed than in any other genocide in the history of the world. (2) Those who spearheaded the revival were the most unlikely people at best—a murderer, an over-the-hill missionary, and a severely depressed doctor. In spite of these two serious problems, a wonderful revival was clearly authored by God, and it brought him great glory.

In order to set the stage for this true story, I must give you a brief history of Cambodia from 1975 to 1979 (the period of time detailed in the award-winning movie *The Killing Fields*). My main source for this history is from the website *Cambodian Tribunal Monitor*.[1] The Khmer (Cambodian) Rouge (Red), otherwise known as the Communist Party of Kampuchea, ruled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. The Khmer Rouge leader, Pol Pot, took control of Cambodia in 1975 in the wake of a civil war that ousted Prince Sihanouk. Pol Pot wanted to transform Cambodia into a rural, classless society not unlike communist China. People were not allowed to leave their rural cooperatives, and if three or more people gathered together in unapproved conversation, they risked being charged as enemies of the state and executed. Others worked twelve hours a day, and many died from inadequate rest, starvation, and lack of medical services. Cambodian soldiers, military officers, and civil servants under Prince Sihanouk, as well as intellectuals, city residents, and minority groups, were detained, interrogated, imprisoned, tortured, and executed.

Many who escaped execution were members of Prince Sihanouk's Free Khmer, who fought against the Khmer Rouge. For the most part, the Free Khmer were overpowered by the Khmer Rouge. Many of the Free Khmer fled into neighboring Thailand. When the Vietnamese fought their way into Cambodia to conquer it in 1979, the Khmer Rouge had killed nearly two million of its own people. In

1. http://www.cambodiatribunal.org/history/cambodian-history/khmer-rouge-history/.

the wake of the Vietnamese offensive, the Khmer Rouge, like the Free Khmer, fled into neighboring Thailand. For obvious reasons, the Khmer Rouge and Free Khmer were housed in different refugee camps. One of the Khmer Rouge refugee camps at the Thailand/Cambodia border was Sa Kaoe, where I served as the attending physician on a malaria ward for just two weeks in the spring of 1980. But I am getting ahead of my story.

I was a resident physician in family medicine in Charleston, South Carolina, from 1978 to 1981. My wife and I heard of the genocide in Cambodia at a church service in the winter of 1979, and on our way home from that service, I told my wife that I would really like to help the Free Khmer refugees. That was not possible, however, because I could not be released from my duties as a second-year family medicine resident. My wife and I decided that at least we could pray for the refugees.

When I went to the residency center the following day, I found a remarkable memo in my mailbox. The memo, from the dean of the medical university of South Carolina, said that in response to the refugee crisis in Cambodia, resident physicians could be released from their duties to serve in Cambodia and that the service would be credited to their diplomas. Additionally, all service provided would be financed by the Southern Baptist Church. I immediately called my wife and told her that I had received a handwritten message from God. I could hardly tell God no to what couldn't have been a clearer calling. Even though we had a six-month-old son, my wife fully supported my decision to help in this potentially dangerous mission.

In preparation for our departure to Cambodia, a group of Charleston resident physicians and faculty from many different medical disciplines met together regularly to plan our mission and create a strong support group. By the spring of 1980 we had bonded and were ready to fly to Thailand. However, when I stepped off the

plane in Thailand, I had a panic attack, which rapidly precipitated a severe depression. I have had a history of severe depressions since the age of ten (seven depressions in all, with the seventh lasting thirteen years). I experience depression as terror, searing mental pain, poor concentration, inaccessible memory, mental exhaustion, a seeming inability to do even the smallest tasks, and a longing for death. Needless to say I could not understand why God allowed me to become so depressed when I had been so excited about my six-week mission to the Cambodians in Thailand.

I was initially assigned to a mission hospital in Thailand, for two weeks, to be initiated into the Thailand culture and local medical practice. Fortunately I found some imipramine (an antidepressant) in the mission pharmacy. Unfortunately it takes four to six weeks for the antidepressant to take effect. So despite the medicine, I remained severely depressed. After two weeks I was transferred back to my mission team at a camp for the Free Khmer. When I arrived at the Free Khmer refugee camp, I found that there were too many physicians for the number of refugees, and I was left with nothing to do. With this new reality, I became even more depressed since I couldn't understand why God had sent me to Thailand if there was no need for my medical services. After two weeks of doing almost nothing except drowning in my depression, our mission group received a memo from Sa Kaeo, a Khmer Rouge refugee camp in northeastern Thailand. The memo said Sa Kaeo was in need of a physician for a malaria ward, since the attending physician had become ill and had to return to the United States. No one in our mission team wanted the assignment because we were such a cohesive group. I, however, experienced a remarkably clear sense from God that I needed to accept the assignment. I knew that from a mental health perspective, leaving my support group was the worst possible choice, but somehow I knew that God would take care of me. I also knew that

God would help me get over my well-founded prejudice against the murderous Khmer Rouge.

When I arrived at the Khmer Rouge refugee camp in Sa Kaeo, I was assigned to a malaria ward. Upon being admitted to the medical ward, most patients were too ill to talk to, apart from their medical history. By the second day, however, most were more attentive. God had impressed upon me that I needed to share the gospel with every patient through an interpreter. I was, however, so depressed that the only thing I could communicate was to ask all the patients whether there was sin in their lives. The response was uniformly yes. Given the recent history of the Khmer Rouge, it is not surprising that so many would recognize their sin. Still, I was amazed at the honesty of 100 percent of my patients, and I then told them that I would bring good news about their sin the next day.

As I made ward rounds the following day, many of the patients had big smiles on their faces. They told me they had not been able to wait to hear the good news from me and so had sought out the ward chaplain. The chaplain was a retired Cambodian Methodist missionary. He had had only a small harvest of faithful believers while he was in Cambodia, but he could speak Cambodian fluently and had translated the biblical book of John into Khmer (Cambodian). The missionary chaplain lacked a charismatic personality, but he clearly loved Jesus and was a channel of the Holy Spirit.

There was only one Khmer Rouge patient on my ward who could read. In Cambodia he had been a vicious leader. Somehow, he had escaped death—the majority of those who could read had been killed because they were considered intellectuals. He was very ill, suffering with the most fatal form of malaria, complicated by bacterial pneumonia. His chest X-ray hung over his bed on a clothesline for easy viewing. During the day when this patient felt stronger (a strength I felt was miraculous, given the severity of his illnesses), he stood up

on his cot and read aloud in a strong voice from the beginning to the end of John, over and over again. Periodically he would point to the abnormality on his chest X-ray and tell his fellow patients that God was healing him of the pneumonia. While he read, the Holy Spirit was a palpable reality throughout the ward.

When I made rounds the second day, I very briefly shared the good news to those who were not smiling. I simply told them that Jesus Christ had died for their sins, and if they trusted him, they would be completely forgiven. A full half of them accepted Jesus as Savior and Lord. The missionary chaplain had to explain to them in more detail the meaning and necessity of salvation. I was too depressed to do that. Two of my patients died but not before they favorably received the good news of Jesus, the forgiver of their sin and the joy of their salvation.

Also remarkable was that God was rapidly raising up a Khmer Rouge evangelist who had been discipled by our missionary chaplain. He had been a Christian for only three weeks. The evangelist was no Billy Graham, but daily he went to the scores of new house churches in the camp (which were really just shacks). There he evangelized and discipled the Cambodians all day at great risk of martyrdom at the hand of the unconverted Khmer Rouge leaders. Those who were part of the house churches were also at great risk. The Khmer Rouge leaders told the people that if they converted to Christianity, they would have to "lay on the ground" when they returned to Cambodia, a euphemism for digging your own grave. At the end of each day the evangelist was exhausted but was unable to sleep and was visibly trembling from anxiety. Each night I would give him a shot of Valium (a tranquilizer and sleep medicine). Each morning he woke up refreshed and continued his vigorous ministry.

I was at Sa Kaeo for only two weeks but participated in a spiritual revival that ultimately led to the salvation of several thousand Khmer

Rouge refugees. I heard some time after I left Sa Kaeo that the new Christian refugees asked the Thailand government to allow them to build a Christian church. Thailand is predominantly Buddhist, so the government told the Christian refugees that they could not build a church until there was a Buddhist temple. Seeking the Lord's guidance, the Christian Khmer Rouge first built a Buddhist temple, which was hardly used, and then a large, thriving Christian church.

As I began this story I recounted the two reasons a revival was so unlikely at Sa Kaeo. First, the converts were among the vilest and most hardened sinners the world has ever known (every bit as evil as the Nazi SS). Second, the leaders of the revival were the least suitable people for participation in a revival. The four leaders of the revival whom God had raised up were (1) a severely depressed doctor (me) of a busy malarial ward who was mentally capable only of sharing the most elementary gospel message; (2) a retired missionary minister who had seen little fruit while serving in Cambodia but knew Cambodian and had translated John; (3) an exhausted, anxious, brand-new Khmer Rouge evangelist; and (4) a rare Khmer Rouge patient who could read and was sick with the most fatal form of malaria, complicated by pneumonia. Nevertheless, he read the Gospel of John over and over again.

These four weak vessels were used by the Lord in an astounding way. During the time I was in Thailand, I had no joy despite the many conversions I witnessed, because I was so depressed. But now I am full of great joy thinking about the way the Lord used weak vessels, including me, in order to maximize his glory. Jesus clearly led this great revival, leaving no doubt that the Holy Spirit was responsible for it.

I continue to have recurrent severe depressions, so I look forward to the day when my feeble mind is completely renewed in the eternal new creation. Even during my deepest depressions, however,

I can take some comfort in the way God used me in a Khmer Rouge revival in a refugee camp at the Thailand/Cambodia border in 1980. Over the years I have come to trust God increasingly. If God could use me when I was so severely depressed, how could I not trust him with all other things? God always brings glory to himself, and being a weak vessel is no obstacle to the accomplishment of his will—his good and perfect will.

My life is a testimony that God uses weakness to produce strength and thus accomplish his gracious rule. Indeed, Jesus said to the apostle Paul, "'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore [Paul says] I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses . . . with distresses . . . with calamities, for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:9–10). This is the irony of Christian living, upon which this book by my friend and former teacher, Greg Beale, will elaborate.

Andrew A. White, MD, MATS, 2017

Series Preface

Most of us tend to approach the Bible early on in our Christian lives as a vast, cavernous, and largely impenetrable book. We read the text piecemeal, finding golden nuggets of inspiration here and there, but remain unable to plug any given text meaningfully into the overarching storyline. Yet one of the great advances in evangelical biblical scholarship over the past few generations has been the recovery of biblical theology—that is, a renewed appreciation for the Bible as a theologically unified, historically rooted, progressively unfolding, and ultimately Christ-centered narrative of God's covenantal work in our world to redeem sinful humanity.

This renaissance of biblical theology is a blessing, yet little of it has been made available to the general Christian population. The purpose of Short Studies in Biblical Theology is to connect the resurgence of biblical theology at the academic level with everyday believers. Each volume is written by a capable scholar or churchman who is consciously writing in a way that requires no prerequisite theological training of the reader. Instead, any thoughtful Christian disciple can track with and benefit from these books.

Each volume in this series takes a whole-Bible theme and traces it through Scripture. In this way readers not only learn about a

given theme but also are given a model for how to read the Bible as a coherent whole.

We have launched this series because we love the Bible, we love the church, and we long for the renewal of biblical theology in the academy to enliven the hearts and minds of Christ's disciples all around the world. As editors, we have found few discoveries more thrilling in life than that of seeing the whole Bible as a unified story of God's gracious acts of redemption, and indeed of seeing the whole Bible as ultimately about Jesus, as he himself testified (Luke 24:27; John 5:39).

The ultimate goal of Short Studies in Biblical Theology is to magnify the Savior and to build up his church—magnifying the Savior through showing how the whole Bible points to him and his gracious rescue of helpless sinners; and building up the church by strengthening believers in their grasp of these life-giving truths.

Dane C. Ortlund and Miles V. Van Pelt

Introduction

Our life consists of ups and downs. We are usually surprised by both, but we should not be so surprised, since the Bible testifies that such ups and downs are part of the divinely designed warp and woof of life. This is true of both the believer in Christ and the unbeliever. But what may appear for the unbeliever as a positive upturn in life is sometimes really, from God's view and plan, the beginning of a downturn in judgment. And what appears to be a downturn in the believer's life is really an upturn in blessing.

These ups and downs involve ironic patterns. What is *irony*? Irony is the saying of something or the doing of something that implies its opposite. What is said or done really indicates the reverse of the saying or act. This book is about the notion that God deals with humans in primarily ironic ways. The Bible is a record of how God has so dealt with humans. There are two kinds of biblical or theological irony. There is *retributive irony* whereby God punishes people by the very means of their own sin. We will see this in chapters 1 and 2. There is also *redemptive irony* whereby the faithful appear to be cursed, but as they persevere in faith, they are really in the midst of being blessed.[1] We will see this in chapters 3 to 6. Both kinds of

1. Warren Austin Gage first formulated these two kinds of theological irony in a personal conversation, which has helped me to clarify better these kinds of ironies in the Bible.

theological ironies are true of humans in general. Everyone is ultimately caught in the matrix of one of these two ironic patterns of living. Christians need to be aware of the ironic nature of life in order that they not become discouraged at bad events in their lives. In fact, we will see that the ironic nature of Christian living is necessary in order that faith be given opportunity to grow.

This book explains how Scripture depicts these two kinds of irony in the lives of people. And how these two ironies reach their zenith points in Satan (through retributive irony) and in Christ (through redemptive irony). As you read this book, you will perceive more of the nature of what irony is. Before I can discuss irony in the Scriptures, however, I must talk briefly about the various kinds of literary ironies.[2]

At its core, "irony is saying one thing and meaning another."[3] All ironies are composed of three basic elements: (1) two or more layers or levels of meaning (one to the observer and one to the victim). (2) One layer has an opposite meaning to that of the other layer (respectively, what is apparent is the opposite of what is reality). (3) Either the observer or the victim is unaware of this tension or surprised by it.[4] Generally, three kinds of ironies have traditionally been recognized in literary studies. There is *verbal irony*, which is saying one thing and meaning its opposite. Here a verbal statement is aimed at a particular person. Second, there is *dramatic irony* or an irony of narrated events, wherein narrated events are turned to the opposite of the way that they appeared to be heading. Finally, there is *character irony*, part of dramatic irony, whereby one's true character stands in contrast with what he appears to be.[5]

2. I am grateful to my research assistant, Tyler Milliken, for his research into literary irony, of which the brief remainder of this chapter is a summary.

3. Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark's Gospel: Text and Subtext* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 60, citing Cicero.

4. Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark's Gospel*, 61, citing D. C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, 1st ed. (London: Methuen Young, 1969), 19–20.

5. See InHee C. Berg, *Irony in the Matthean Passion Narrative* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 79–80, 88, 95, for discussion of these three ironies.

Luke's narrative of the rejection of the gospel by the Jews is saturated with irony. In particular, Luke's narration of the rejection of Jesus is mirrored by the depiction in Acts, where every effort to stand against God's plan only fulfills it in every prophetic detail (e.g., see Acts 2:23 and 13:27). In Luke, the rejection of Jesus by the Jews is the catalyst for his redeeming death, whereas in Acts the persecution of the church becomes the catalyst for saving evangelism. Luke also develops the principle that "some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last" (Luke 13:30). These programmatic ironies run throughout Luke-Acts.[6] Thus, some of the highest forms of biblical irony are where there is narrated an "unexpected reversal of fate and fortune," which is "the jolting turn of events" wherein "the mighty are brought low and humble exalted."[7]

In John 19 the Roman soldiers mock the bleeding Jesus by saying their "Hail to the King!" The soldiers do not believe that Jesus is any kind of king, and they intend their sarcastic words to be a direct attack on Jesus, whom they believe is an imposter. A reader perceives that the "lower" level of the mocking is false, whereas the irony becomes apparent at the "higher" level, where it is evident that the soldiers are the real victims of their own mocking, since they are crucifying the one who is, in fact, the true divine king of the universe.[8] Another example of this kind of irony is Paul's claim in 2 Corinthians 12:10: "When I am weak, then I am strong."[9]

So now we turn to the substance of the book.

6. E.g., see Jerry L. Ray, *Narrative Irony in Luke–Acts* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), 109–11. For brief definition of dialectical irony (or programmatic irony), see p. 38; on Acts 2:23, see pp. 109–10; on the negative consequences of Jewish rejection and positive Gentile consequences in Acts 13:27–52, see pp. 110–11.
7. Paul Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 11.
8. Cf. similarly on John 19:1–3 in Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 132.
9. Karl A. Plank, *Paul and the Irony of Affliction* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 21n13.

1

God Judges People by Their Own Sin

> [The Nazi War criminal Josef] Mengele did not entirely escape punishment. . . . The aging fugitive . . . "lived apprehensive and afraid, fearful of being found by Jews." . . . He suffered migraine headaches and slept with a Mauser pistol by his bed. . . . Though there was never a punishment that would fit the dimensions of Mengele's crimes, is it not peculiarly appropriate that he was condemned to a lifetime of fearing his own victims, and that his punishment should be inflicted by himself?
>
> —Otto Fredrick, *Time*, June 24, 1985

One of my favorite pastimes in graduate school, after completing a big paper or final exam, was to go to the local ice cream shop and reward myself with a huge bowl of chocolate mint ice cream. This was the height of culinary delight. In reality, I found many excuses to reward

myself with such treats. A few years later when I went to my doctor for a physical, he informed me that were I to continue over the years with this ice cream binge, my health would be seriously affected. I realized that the very thing in which I was finding great pleasure could at the same time be causing me, quite literally, "heartache" in the long run. But perhaps my biggest mistake was telling my wife what the doctor had said. I should have known that forever afterward, she would remind me of this sober truth. I have never been able to enjoy my huge bowls of chocolate mint ice cream since. Most of us are familiar with this kind of omnivorous irony. There are so many delicacies that do our taste buds good but simultaneously "do in" our bodies.

On a more serious note, punitive ironies transcend culinary bounds. There are many things people do purely for pleasure or self-interest even though they know it may hurt them in the long run.

A former student of mine, while taking a final exam on the subject of biblical ethics, tried to get a good grade by cheating. During the exam she approached me at the front of the room in order to get clarification about one of the questions. As she pointed her finger to the question on the exam paper, I saw answers written on her hand. The very way she attempted to succeed—through cheating—was the very way in which she failed.

From the political realm, many can probably recall the Machiavellian irony involving former President Richard Nixon. He attempted unjustly to become one of the most famous presidents in American history. He hoped to ensure his success by having all his conversations in the Oval Office recorded. Indeed, Nixon became our most infamous president because these very tapes exposed his underhanded attempts to defeat his political opponents.

These illustrations reflect an ironic moral principle, that when a person unethically schemes to succeed, often the scheme is discovered by the potential victims before it can be accomplished. The very

way by which people attempt sinfully to get ahead often becomes the very means by which they fail.

This principle is at work in every level of life. An article in *Time* magazine some years ago made this observation about drugs: "People addicted to cocaine are out of control. . . . So it is a mean, symmetrical irony that cocaine's effect is to mimic will and emotional focus, permitting the user to feel he is blessed with precisely the virtues he lacks."[1] I know a woman who drank excessively so that she would feel less inhibited when she socialized. This appeared to work for awhile until she had to quit drinking permanently because of a liver ailment. In her later years, because of the deadening effects of alcohol, she had no personality but sat and stared blankly in the midst of social gatherings. The very things in which people wrongly attempt to find liberation frequently become the things that bring them into harsher bondage.

This ironic principle of judgment is expressed well in the proverb, "There is a way which seems right to man, but its end is the way of death" (Prov. 16:25). When we set out to succeed at something in an unethical manner, circumstances often have an uncanny way of reversing so that we are forced to fail.

In the light of what we have already discussed, we can define irony generally as the doing or saying of something that implies its opposite. What is done or said is really the reverse of what at first appears to be the case. God frequently deals with humanity in an ironic way. This is true in his acts of judgment and salvation, so that irony is one of the major thematic threads tying together the whole of Scripture. God repeatedly drives the events of history in the reverse direction from which they first appear to be moving. We look first at how God carries out his work of ironic punishment.

1. Kurt Andersen, "Crashing on Cocaine," *Time,* April 11, 1983, 25.

It's a Turn-Around World

There was once a Persian prince named Haman and a Jew of low status called Mordecai. Mordecai had saved the king of Persia by revealing a plot to kill the king, although the king was unaware that it was Mordecai who had made the plot known. Haman hated Mordecai because he would not bow down and pay homage to him as vice president of Persia (Est. 3:1–5). As a result, Haman vented his childish anger by persuading King Ahasuerus to decree that all Jews in the empire be annihilated (Est. 3:6–15), and he plotted to have Mordecai hanged on the gallows (Est. 5:14).

As providence would have it, the night before Mordecai was to be hanged, the king could not sleep, so he ordered his servants to read to him for pleasure's sake the recent records of the affairs of the kingdom. In these records the king heard it read that it was Mordecai who had revealed the assassination plot against him. Upon discovering that Mordecai had not been honored for this, he desired to make things right. Now at this very time Haman happened to be entering the king's court to request permission to hang Mordecai. Before Haman had the opportunity to discuss Mordecai, the king asked him, "What is to be done for the man whom the king desires to honor?" (Est. 6:6). Haman, thinking the king was referring to him, answered,

> For the man whom the king desires to honor, let them bring a royal robe which the king has worn, and the horse on which the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown has been placed; and let the robe and the horse be handed over to one of the king's noble princes and let them array the man whom the king desires to honor and lead him on horseback through the city square, and proclaim before him, "Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king desires to honor. (Est. 6:7–9)

Haman was shocked and humiliated when the king commanded him to "do so for Mordecai the Jew" (Est. 6:10), especially since Haman was required to lead Mordecai's horse through the city square. This was certainly an unexpected turn of events, but it was only the beginning of an even greater ironic reversal.

After the king had authorized Haman's plot (Est. 3:8–11), Queen Esther, Mordecai's step-daughter, informed the king about Haman's plot to exterminate all the Jews (which included Esther) and to hang Mordecai. The king angrily declared that Haman should be hanged on the very gallows upon which he had planned to hang Mordecai (Esther 7), and he made it possible for the Jews throughout his land to destroy Haman's allies who were planning to exterminate them (Esther 8–9). Therefore, "when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, it was turned to the contrary so that the Jews themselves gained the mastery" (Est. 9:1), and "it was a month which was turned for them from sorrow into gladness" (Est. 9:22). The Lord had designed that Haman's wicked scheme "which he had devised . . . should return on his own head" (Est. 9:25). That the name "Haman" in Hebrew may mean "celebrated one" is likely not coincidence. He tried to win a victory over the Jews and celebrate, but he was the one defeated and celebrated over by his enemies (Est. 9:17–22, 27). In fact, this victory has been celebrated by the Jews as the festival of Purim for centuries ever since.

Surely the story of Mordecai's rise and Haman's demise exemplifies a more general principle whereby God "sets on high those who are lowly, and those who mourn are lifted to safety," but "He frustrates the plotting of the shrewd, so that their hands cannot attain success" (Job 5:11–12), for "his own scheme brings him down. . . . And . . . a noose for him is hidden in the ground" (Job 18:7–10).

An Eye for an Eye

This story from the book of Esther is illustrative of the same idea found repeatedly in the Old Testament, where God punishes sinners by means of their own sin. The principle of ironic justice is lucidly summarized in Leviticus 24:19–31:

> If a man injures his neighbor, just as he has done, so shall it be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye . . . just as he has injured a man, so it shall be inflicted on him. (cf. Ex. 21:23–25)

The idea is that the form of a man's punishment is to be patterned after the form of his crime or sin.[2] So, for example, the very act of killing another shows the pattern of how the killer must be punished—he must also be killed. Hence, killing may seem the right way to act for a man, but its end is the way of death. Furthermore, the murderer will be punished by means of his own sin.

That this is not an atypical form of divine punishment is born out by the Psalms:

> Hold them guilty, O God;
> By their own devices let them fall! (Ps. 5:10)

> [The wicked man] has dug a pit and hollowed it out,
> And he has fallen into the hole which he made.
> His mischief will return upon his own head. (Ps. 7:15–16)

Speaking of the judgment of evil nations, David says: "In the net which they hid, their own foot has been caught. The Lord

2. Exodus 21:23–25 is known as the *lex talionis* (law of retaliation) in which the punishment resembles the crime committed. Strictly speaking, this principle is literally true *primarily* in the case of murder. Otherwise Exodus 21 becomes a figurative expression to denote that the gravity of punishment must be equal to the gravity of the crime. But we shall see that the literal understanding is observable throughout the Old Testament.

has . . . executed judgment. In the work of his own hands the wicked is snared" (Ps. 9:15–16). Perhaps reflecting on the times when Saul was hunting David with the sword, David asserts, "The wicked have drawn the sword . . . to slay those who are upright in conduct. Their sword will enter their own heart" (Ps. 37:14–15; cf. 1 Sam. 31:4). In light of this, the verdict of ironic justice upon Saul was predictable, as he took his life by falling on his own sword (1 Sam. 31:4). Likewise, David's son Solomon states, "He who rolls a stone, it will come back on him" (Prov. 26:27). Indeed, "there is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Prov. 14:12; 16:25). In the Old Testament this ironic principle of justice was most observed by the "wise man" who discerned its repeated occurrence in the lives of others (see Job 18:8; Pss. 35:8; 57:6; 64:3–8; 75:4–5, 10; 115:2–8; Prov. 1:18–19, 31; 14:32; 21:7, 13; 22:16; 26:27; 28:10, 22).

You Shall Reap What You Sow

Is it a coincidence that most of the statements of ironic judgment are found in the wisdom writings of the psalmist of Israel, David? It is likely no accident, since David, perhaps more than any man of his time, had experienced God's ironic judgment upon himself. However, that he so often records the principle is a demonstration that he learned from it with a repentant attitude. But what was this judgment upon David, and what had he done to deserve it? Second Samuel 12:9–11 summarizes the sin and judgment:

> You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife. . . . Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house. . . . I will even take your wives before your eyes and give them to your companion, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight.

Surely David was being punished by means of the very sins that he had committed. David's murder of Uriah by the sword was punished by his sons Amnon and Absalom being likewise murdered (cf. 2 Sam. 13; 18). And just as David committed adultery with another's wife, so his wives became similarly abused (2 Sam. 16:22). David should not have been surprised by the severity of this ironic penalty, since he would have remembered a similar fate by another king during his youth. Perhaps the verdict pronounced by Nathan the prophet echoed in David's mind the sentence passed on Agag, king of the Amalekites, by Samuel the prophet: "'As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.' And Samuel hewed Agag to pieces before the LORD at Gilgal" (1 Sam. 15:33). The ironic judgment of Saul must have been evident even before his suicide: "Because you [Saul] have rejected the word of the LORD, He [God] has also rejected you from being king" (1 Sam. 15:23). And, of course, the suicidal end of Saul's life should have been clearer in mind. Nevertheless, as we will see, David's own life is spared, and his curse is turned ultimately into a blessing because of his repentant spirit.

David's case is instructive, since it shows that even believers in the Lord "reap what they sow." Their punishment may not have the eternal dimension as with the unbeliever, but it is nonetheless real. Just as Jacob the believer deceived his father Isaac through wearing the skins of goats and masquerading himself as Esau, so Jacob was deceived by his sons when they masqueraded Joseph's death by sprinkling goat's blood on Joseph's tunic. Arthur Pink has well said:

> Though God forgives His people their sins, yet He frequently gives them plain proof of His holy abhorrence of the same, and causes them to taste something of the bitter fruits which they bring forth.[3]

3. A. W. Pink, *The Life of David*, vol. 2 (Swengel, PA: Reiner, 1976), 24.

Christians should well consider their actions and the possible consequences. How many Christian young people desire to be married? Yet the primary qualities sought in a potential mate are often attractive appearance and personality. Spiritual motivations and commitment to the Lord are too often overlooked. When a Christian marries a non-Christian troubles are bound to come. The unbeliever cannot understand the spiritual zeal of his Christian mate. Consequently, the unbelieving mate reacts antagonistically to spiritual activities such as family devotions, mealtime prayer, and church attendance. This reaction is inevitable because of the non-Christian mate's exclusive focus on the physical realm.

The point is that when Christians emphasize external realities when choosing a spouse, this choice can be the very thing that curses them later. The very things wrongly viewed as blessings at the beginning ironically become the very things that plague and thwart the attempted spiritual growth of Christians. This can affect the children of such marriages as well! Solomon's pursuit of sexual and political indulgence with an abundance of wives likewise came back to haunt him, for it was this very thing that "turned his heart away after other gods" (1 Kings 11:4). How ironic that the author of the ideal marriage relationship (Song of Solomon) did not heed his own lessons. Like his father, David, Solomon, too, later realized the futility of his sin (cf. Eccles. 2:8–11). In so many ways, we can be judged by the very things we want to think are right but are really sinful. "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Prov. 14:12).

Your Sins Will Find You Out

Although God's people are viewed as suffering under his chastening hand, the ironic judgment of unbelievers receives much description in the Bible, especially those who represent the kingdom of Satan. With such people in mind, David proclaims in Psalm 10:2, "In pride

the wicked hotly pursue the afflicted; let them be caught in the plots which they have devised." Again and again throughout Scripture the wicked are seen as either oppressing God's people or attempting to kill them in order to receive some earthly reward. And just as often, their efforts to overcome the godly backfire on them, much as is portrayed in *The Road Runner Show* cartoons where the coyote always becomes frustrated by trapping himself in the trap he has laid for the road runner (indeed, "He who rolls a stone, it will come back on him," Prov. 26:27).

Traitors Betray Themselves

It is likely that the ironic patterns of life were further impressed on David's mind because of events that transpired in the latter part of his reign. It was tragically after David had just forgiven Absalom his son for murdering another son, Amnon, that Absalom repaid the kindness by leading a rebellion to overthrow David (2 Sam. 15–20). To add to David's troubles, his best friend and trusted counselor, Ahithophel, sided with Absalom in the conspiracy. Absalom's only motive was self-aggrandizement—he wanted to be king—but Ahithophel was probably seeking revenge against David for his murder of Uriah and adultery with Bathsheba, the granddaughter of Ahithophel. However, when Ahithophel's strategy for assassinating David was mysteriously rejected by Absalom, Ahithophel committed suicide (2 Sam. 16:20–17:14, 23). He knew if his plan were not followed, the rebellion would not succeed. Ahithophel was right. Absalom followed another plan of attack and was killed in battle.

Absalom was the most handsome man in Israel, especially because of his beautiful hair. Since he took such pride in his beautiful head of hair, he cut it only once every year (2 Sam. 14:25–26). Yet it was because of his "heavy head of hair" (14:26) that he met his end. As he was riding through a forest during the battle, "his head caught

fast in the oak, so he was left hanging" until he was found and killed by David's army (2 Sam. 18:9–15). The source of his pride brought about his downfall. Absalom, whose name in Hebrew means "Father of Peace," was just the opposite—a son of contention. Truly "the advice of the cunning is quickly thwarted" (Job 5:13). Absalom and Ahithophel attempted unjustly to kill David, but before they could succeed, their plot was turned back on their own head. The very means by which they hoped to dispose of David was the very way by which they were disposed of. The following words penned by David may well have this evil duo in mind:

> For without cause they hid their net for me;
> Without cause they dug a pit for my soul. . . .
> Let the net which he hid catch himself;
> Into that very destruction let him fall. (Ps. 35:7–8)

A Preincarnate Hitler

The pharaoh of ancient Egypt is one of the best examples of ironic judgment, since in great arrogance he hotly pursued afflicted Israel but was "caught in the plots which [he had] devised" (Ps. 10:2). Pharaoh's first mistake was to claim to be God. He gave to himself such titles as "savior of Egypt," "Lord of the living," "Universal god," and the sovereign "god of heaven and earth." As such he was also held to be the divine judge after death.[4] This is, no doubt, why Pharaoh responds to Moses's message that begins, "Thus says the LORD" (Ex. 5:1), with an equally authoritative, "Thus says Pharaoh" (Ex. 5:10). But, indeed, such a divine claim was farthest from the truth since,

4. For a background of Pharaoh's divine names and functions consult I. Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1967); S. Morenz, *Egyptian Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1960); E. L. R. Meyerowitz, *The Divine Kingship in Ghana and Ancient Egypt* (London: Faber & Faber, 1960); H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

ironically, Scripture identifies the pharaoh of the exodus with Satan, "the dragon" (Isa. 51:9; cf. Ps. 74:13–14 and Rev. 12:3–4, 7–9), and the "sea monster" (Ps. 89:10; cf. also Ps. 87:4; Isa. 30:7; Ezek. 32:2). Pharaoh's obstinate claim to deity, even in spite of the plagues that came upon him in Exodus 7–13, was the reason for his judgment.

Pharaoh's mistaken belief in his divine sovereignty must have led him to issue the edict that the firstborn males of Israel were to be killed by the Hebrew midwives (Ex. 1:16), and when this failed, he ordered the firstborn to be drowned in a river (Ex. 1:22). Not only did Pharaoh's attempts to overcome Israel fail, but his edicts declaring the killing of the firstborn were providentially reversed so that they fell on him in judgment. Not only did God kill the firstborn of every Egyptian family (Ex. 12:29), but he also drowned Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea (Ex. 15:1–12). His sins came back on his own head, since he was punished ironically by the very things he perpetrated against Israel.

No Truth and No Consequences

Before we leave this discussion of Pharaoh, it is further enlightening to understand his role as the purported savior of those who died and faced imminent judgment. The Egyptians believed that after death, people had to go through a trial in the Hall of Judgment to determine whether they were guilty of earthly sin. If found innocent, a person inherited eternal bliss, but if found guilty, he or she suffered judgment. There were two parts to this judgment process. (1) The deceased person arrived at one end of the Hall of Judgment and was presented with a long list of sins characteristic of human life, which he or she categorically denied. (2) While the denial of sin was taking place, the deceased's heart was being weighed on the "scales of judgment" at the other end of the hall in order to see if its testimony supported the person's denial. The Egyptians believed that all people

are sinful and that the heart would tell the truth if it were separated from the bad influence of the body, so when the heart confessed the deceased's sins, it would become "heavy" with sin, and the disequilibrium of the scales would indicate guilt and judgment. Therefore, the heart's confession of sin would demonstrate that the deceased's denial was a lie, with the result of impending judgment.

Since the Egyptians believed in the universal sinfulness of humanity, it seems that no Egyptian had a chance for salvation. This was a tremendous theological dilemma. However, the Egyptians also believed that the heart could be stopped from naturally confessing sin so that salvation could still be possible. This was thought to be accomplished by placing a stone scarab beetle, shaped in the form of a heart, either in the mummified clothes encasing the deceased or tied to the chest. The scarab beetle was a symbol of the sun god, of whom Pharaoh was viewed as the incarnation, and they thought it had magical powers to suppress the heart's tendency to confess sin so that salvation could be secured. Thus it was actually the magical power of the divine Pharaoh that imposed this silence upon the heart and was responsible for the individual's salvation.

There were various magical spells written on the stone scarab heart to bring about the silence of the human heart. The magical power of the sun god (and Pharaoh) was believed to transfer the stillness of the stone heart to the deceased so that the heart's movements to confess sin would be transformed into the stonelike stillness of silence. This suppression of the heart's confession apparently came to be seen as a kind of "hardening of the heart."[5]

Could this immoral Egyptian concept of salvation through "hardening of the heart" be the background against which to understand the

5. For an argument supporting this contention see A. Hermann, "Das Steinhartes Herz," in *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 4 (Münster: Aschendorff'sche, 1961), 102–5. I have also argued this in my "The Exodus Hardening Motif of Yahweh as a Polemic," ThM Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary (1976), 48–52.

Lord's hardening of Pharaoh's heart? Moses repeatedly commanded Pharaoh to let the people go, but God repeatedly hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he would not release Israel. But perhaps this was not the only purpose of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Whereas the pharaoh's magical hardening caused a nonconfession of sin and an apparent sinless heart, resulting in salvation, the Lord's hardening of Pharaoh's heart appears to have led to his own heart confessing sin (cf. Ex. 9:27, 34; 10:16–17) and acknowledging his sinfully heavy condition, resulting in judgment (cf. Ex. 14:4, 17–28). Whereas Pharaoh's hardening the hearts of others falsely suppressed sin, the Lord's hardening of Pharaoh's heart rightly revealed the monarch's sin.

The Lord's hardening of Pharaoh's heart may have been intended, in part, to show that the Egyptian way of salvation is a sham and was really the very opposite—a way of damnation. In fact, is it not interesting that the dead Pharaoh was the only Egyptian who did not have to go through the judgment process, but now, more than any other Egyptian in the exodus narrative, he is the focus of God's hardening judgment? It is probably no coincidentce that one of the Hebrew words used for the Lord's hardening of Pharaoh means "to make heavy." Ironically, the pharaoh who claimed to remove the sinful heaviness of others' hearts could not remove his own. The pharaoh himself had now "been weighed on the scales and found deficient" (Dan. 5:27) and awaited impending judgment at the Red Sea. Pharaoh's heart became literally like the stone heart that symbolized his power and ironically caused him to be hard and insensitive to God's commands, which led to his destruction. Because of his stone heart, he sank like a stone in the Red Sea.

Daniel's Accusers Snared by Their Own Trap

In the book of Daniel, there is a narrative account that begins with the mention of Daniel being promoted by the king to the office of

"vice president" over all Persia. As a result, the other officials in the royal court became jealous and tried to find evidence of some misconduct, which would be grounds for accusation against Daniel. By so doing, they hoped the king would dismiss Daniel from his office. However, no wrongdoing could be found in him.

Therefore, they devised a plan that would ensure that Daniel would break the law. They persuaded King Darius to establish a temporary law whereby anyone who made a petition or prayer to any god or man besides the king for thirty days "shall be cast into the lions' den" (Dan. 6:7). No doubt, this flattered the king, but it also meant that Daniel would have to break the statute since he always prayed faithfully to his Lord three times a day.

Soon after the law was enacted, the enemies of Daniel brought evidence before the king that Daniel had violated the royal decree and had to suffer the penalty of capital punishment. The king was distressed because he loved Daniel, and he tried to figure out how he could deliver him. However, the king was forced to enact the penalty, since no law established by a Persian king could ever be revoked (Dan. 6:12–18). Although the king begrudgingly had Daniel thrown into the lions' den, he hoped that Daniel's God would deliver him.

The next morning the king's hopes were fulfilled, for God had delivered Daniel from the lions' mouths. Because of the injustice done to Daniel, the king ordered that Daniel's accusers be thrown into the lions' den. Daniel's fate recalls David's cry for divine vengeance upon Saul:

> My soul is among lions;
> I must lie among those who breathe forth fire,
> Even the sons of men, whose teeth are spears and arrows,
> And their tongue a sharp sword. . . .
> My soul is bowed down;

They dug a pit before me;
They themselves have fallen into the midst of it. (Ps. 57:4, 6)

Perhaps the irony of this punishment is expressed in Daniel 6:24: "those men who had eaten the pieces [an Aramaic idiom translated as 'maliciously accused'] of Daniel" were cast into the pit, "and they had not reached the bottom of the den before the lions . . . crushed all their bones" to pieces with their mouths!

Ironic Judgment as the Rule, Not the Exception

Is this kind of retributive affliction the exception rather than the rule? The answer, I believe, is negative. In fact, I have already mentioned that Psalms and Proverbs abundantly testify to this form of chastisement. The testimony of these two books is significant because they present most of the statements in the form of generalizations or principles.

The expressions of ironic justice in the Psalms are found in David's prayers about the wicked, which are clearly generalized references either to the fate of a multitude of evil people or to his own personal enemies whose descriptions seem to transcend David's own situation.[6] So in Psalm 9:15, David speaks broadly of the nations of the earth who "have sunk down in the pit which they have made" and been caught "in the net which they hid" (see also Ps. 115:2–8). Likewise David speaks sweepingly of the wicked in Psalm 37:14–15 who "have drawn the sword" yet "their sword will enter their own heart." The universal tenor of the psalm is introduced in the first verse: "Do not fret because of evildoers; be not envious toward wrongdoers."

Proverbs especially emphasizes the universality of retributive irony by virtue of the kind of literature it is. Any particular proverb in the book arose from and is based on a wise person's, most

6. Many throughout church history have believed most of the psalms to have three references: (1) the individual psalmist (often David), (2) Christ, and (3) the corporate church. Augustine was one of the earliest church commentators to hold this view.

especially Solomon's, long experience of observing life. A proverbial saying develops through a lifetime of observing various events and comparing them. In fact, the Hebrew word for *proverb* literally means "comparison" or "likeness." As the wise man compares all these various events, he begins to see that some are similar, and this reveals a universal principle in some pithy saying. For instance, the proverb "like mother, like daughter" (e.g., Ezek. 16:44) arose originally from observing homes in which children had a tendency to be like their parents. So a general principle was discerned, that the mother's relation to her daughter influences to a significant degree the daughter's personality or character. Similarly, the saying "Haste makes waste" is a broad principle derived from frequently observing that a task finished too quickly results in failure (similarly, "The early bird catches the worm").

Accordingly, the maxims of ironic punishment in Proverbs are also expressions of a general principle inherent in the warp and woof of moral reality. Proverbs 28:10 reads, "He who leads the upright astray in an evil way will himself fall into his own pit." The author had observed that those who tried to mislead the godly into some misfortune ended up misleading themselves to their own collapse. Probably one of the most significant proverbs for punitive irony is Proverbs 16:25, which has already been mentioned: "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." No doubt Solomon repeatedly observed that what at first seemed to be the best course of action turned out to be the worst. His own actions ended up condemning him. Consequently, ironic justice, far from being an exceptional phenomenon, is a pattern of life.

Ironic Judgment of Individuals and Nations

That this sort of irony is the rule rather than the exception in the Old Testament is also borne out by numerous other examples where it is

observed in biblical history. When Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons, sinned by offering "strange fire" (burnt offerings) to the Lord, they were punished by fire coming out from the presence of the Lord, which killed them (Lev. 10:1–2).[7] Israel ungratefully murmured against the Lord in the wilderness when they grew tired of the manna and "greedily desired" the meat they used to eat in Egypt (Num. 11:4–23). Therefore, God vented his wrath by giving them so much meat that it spoiled and killed those who had been so greedy. In fact, their graves were called "the graves of craving" (v. 35), for ironically "the greedy found their graves while giving vent to their greedy desires."[8]

When Naboth refused to sell his vineyard to the spoiled and greedy King Ahab, Jezebel incited her husband Ahab to have Naboth falsely accused of publicly cursing God, the penalty of which would be death by stoning. And so two men were bribed to bring false charges against innocent Naboth, and he was stoned. Immediately thereafter God pronounced the punishment that would eventually come upon Ahab for his dastardly deed: "In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth the dogs will lick up your blood" (1 Kings 21:19). Soon thereafter Ahab died in battle, "and the dogs licked up his blood . . . according to the word of the Lord which He spoke" (1 Kings 22:38). The same fate also later befell Jezebel (2 Kings 9:26, 33–37).

The evil king of the Canaanites, Adoni-bezek, was defeated by Israel, and they "cut off his thumbs and big toes" because he had unjustly "cut off" the "thumbs and big toes" of seventy other kings. He then confessed, "As I have done, so God has repaid me" (Judg. 1:6–7). Likewise, because Abimelech wrongly killed "seventy men, on one stone" (Judg. 9:5), "a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abi-

7. See Pink, *Life of David*, 66, who has observed this irony.

8. See A. P. Ross, "Popular Etymology and Paranomasia in the Old Testament," PhD diss., University of Cambridge (1982), 210, who explains the ironic significance of this incident.

melech's head, crushing his skull" (Judg. 9:53). "Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech" (Judg. 9:56; cf. v. 57). The priest Eli wrongly "honored" (literally "made heavy") his sinful sons and so God punished him by making the sons "lightly esteemed" (literally "light") before his sight (cf. 1 Sam. 2:29–30). Their "despising" of God led to God's "contempt" of them. Just as Joab murdered righteous men, so it was pronounced, "The LORD will return his blood on his own head" and he was "put . . . to death, and he was buried" (1 Kings 2:32, 34).

Throughout the Old Testament ironic judgments are executed especially upon wicked nations. Babylon had been particularly brutal in destroying Israel, even to the extent of killing infants. Therefore, the psalmist issues the following imprecation upon them:

> How blessed will be the one who repays you
> With the recompense with which you have repaid us.
> How blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your
> little ones
> Against the rock. (Ps. 137:8–9)

Because Babylon had devoured, plundered, preyed upon, looted, and made Israel naked, so they were to be chastised by suffering the exact same fate at the hands of other nations (see Jer. 30:16; Hab. 2:8; 2:15–16).[9] Latter-day Babylon will likewise be judged (Rev. 18:5–7). As the nations surrounding Israel had defeated them and "sold the sons of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks . . . also I [God] will sell your sons and your daughters (of the surrounding nations) into the hands of Judah, and they will sell them . . . to a distant nation" (Joel 3:6–8).[10]

9. These references were brought to my attention by P. D. Miller in his paper, "A Classification of the Patterns of Correspondence [in Judicial Punishment]," read at the Old Testament Seminar at the University of Cambridge (1978).

10. Miller, "A Classification of the Patterns of Correspondence [in Judicial Punishment]."

Of course, Israel was not exempt from such judgments. When they "rejected the law of the LORD" (Amos 2:4), God judged them by sending "a famine on the land," so that the Israelites would "go to and fro to seek the word of the LORD, but . . . not find it" (Amos 8:11–12). God judged their sin of rejecting his word by removing it from Israel so that his word could no longer be found. In practice, this meant that God would send no more prophets to Israel for a period.

Has not the same tragic irony happened to a significant degree in the Israel of God today, the church of the twenty-first century? The church together with many of the theological seminaries have rejected the authority and relevance of God's word so that today it is relatively rare to hear the Bible preached in many churches. It is as if God has said, "If you want to reject the authority of my word in Scripture, I will spurn you by no longer speaking to you in any way." This is understandable since God has designed his revelation during the church age normatively to come through Scripture. But there are many in churches today who long to hear a word from God but do not. I pray that the church's rejection of God's word is not so complete that he completely rejects communicating through it. The church is being ironically punished by its own sin: the more it rejects God's word, the more God rejects it.

The principle by which God judged all nations in the Old Testament is summarized in Obadiah 15:

> For the day of the LORD draws near on all the nations.
> As you have done, it will be done to you.
> Your dealings will return on your own head.

So also Isaiah's pronouncement of judgment on Assyria would appear generally applicable to other nations:

Woe to you, O destroyer. . . .
As soon as you finish destroying, you shall be destroyed;
As soon as you cease to deal treacherously, others will deal
treacherously with you. (Isa. 33:1)[11]

Proverbs 1 also states the principle on an individual level, but, as we have seen, it is likewise relevant for nations:

My son, if sinners entice you,
Do not consent.
If they say, "Come with us,
Let us lie in wait for blood,
Let us ambush the innocent . . ."
They lie in wait for their own blood;
They ambush their own lives.
So are the ways of everyone who gains by violence;
It takes away the life of its possessors. (1:10–11, 18–19)

However, even in the face of such evidence, many may still insist that God's ironic judgment of the ungodly is uncommon. The primary reason for this insistence lies in the observation that in both ancient and modern times those who live wicked lives usually get away with it. It appears that the godless never get their just deserts in this life. How many people in the business world cheat their way to financial success, live long, luxurious lives, and die wealthy in their old age?

Solomon observed the same phenomenon: "I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness" (Eccles. 7:15; cf. 8:14). However, Solomon also asserted from an eternal perspective that

11. With respect to the references to Jeremiah, Obadiah, and Isaiah, see Miller, "A Classification of the Patterns of Correspondence [in Judicial Punishment]."

> although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, . . . [it] will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow [everlastingly], because he does not fear [believe in] God. (Eccles. 8:12–13; see also 12:13–14)

Walter Kaiser says of these two passages, "The wicked may appear to be getting away with murder . . . but such sinning with seeming impunity will finally be judged by the living God"[12] (see also Ps. 73:1–20). The final judgment by God involves the ultimate irony of unbelief, in which all the evil a man has gotten away with in this life will be poured back on his head in the afterlife.

Yet even before the final judgment, it can be said that all unbelievers begin to be punished in this life, although they may experience worldly success. This punishment is of a spiritual or invisible nature: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18). And "he who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" even now (John 3:36; cf. 3:18). Not to believe in Christ is to be separated from God, which is a punishment in itself and will be extended into eternity if unbelief persists until physical death. In this sense, there really are no exceptions to the ironic punishment of unbelievers in their earthly lives. Their ultimate trust in some aspect of this world is the very thing causing their present spiritual failure and judgment. That this is the case is well illustrated in the history of Israel.

Little Boy Blue

Non-Christians can break the force of God's ironic judgment only by trusting in Christ as their savior, the one who took their judgment

12. Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Ecclesiastes, Total Life*, Everyman's Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 91.

upon himself at the cross. We will speak more of this in the following pages.

I hope that no Christian is reading this and thinking that he or she is exempt from God's ironic forms of judgment. Although Christians will not suffer eternal judgment, they are not exempt from other temporal kinds of punishment. Christians can commit sins in the business world, family, church, and social relationships. If this sin is not confessed to the Lord with a repentant heart, the Lord may use such sin as the very thing that disciplines the sinner.

The song "Cats in the Cradle and the Silver Spoon" by Harry Chapin captures one aspect of the subtlety of this danger for Christian and non-Christian alike. The famous song is about a father who was not home much while his son was growing up. The father was gone so much that he did not get to see his son learn to walk or to throw a ball. As the years pass, the young son expresses his desire to be just like his father one day. Eventually he goes off to college, and when he returns home on school break, the father wants to sit down and catch up with his son, but the son is more interested in borrowing his father's car. The father begins to realize that his son got his wish—he's grown up to be just like his father. Eventually, after the son has moved away and developed his own life, his father calls and inquires about a visit. But the son is too busy with his job and his family, and as he says goodbye, he adds, "It's sure nice talking to you, Dad." When the father hangs up the telephone, he realized with sad irony just how like him his son has become.[13]

There are many ways that we as Christians can be caught in an ironic web of subtle sin. How can we increasingly break out of this web? Of course, the only way to begin to break out of this matrix of sin is to trust in the irony of salvation—that the perfectly righteous

13. The lyrics of the song can be found at https://www.songfacts.com/lyrics/harry-chapin/cats-in-the-cradle.

Jesus experienced the judgment that sinners deserve and that we, who are guilty of sin, are declared righteous because of Christ's work at the cross, which is imputed to us. For those who have believed, I offer three encouragements to help them be able to progress in coming out of sins in which they are entangled (cf. Heb. 12:1).

First, read and study God's word daily so that you may be more sensitive to subtle but dangerous sin and how to overcome it. John says in his first epistle that Christians can become strong through allowing the word of God to abide in them, which will result in "overcoming the evil one" (1 John 2:14). When we do not read God's word, we do not know what God expects of us, and we are more likely to sin.

This first suggestion may appear elementary but, in reality, it is profound and important. It is like the relationship I have with my wife. She does most of the shopping for the family. When we first got married she would buy things I didn't like, and sometimes, even when she bought things I did like, she spent what I thought was too much money. However, now that we have been married for some years, we have come to know each other much more intimately. We are more familiar with each other's tastes and desires. Now when my wife shops, she has a better idea of my tastes and financial desires. In fact, she even occasionally trusts me to shop for the household, since I also have become better acquainted with her personal penchants.

It is the same with the Lord. The more we read his word, the more familiar we become with his mind and character, and the more we are apt to respond the way he would, even in "gray" situations that Scripture does not explicitly address (e.g., whom to marry, what job to take, etc.). Paul says as much in Romans 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind [in Scripture], so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." The more transformed

to Christ's image we become (Rom. 8:29), the more we will respond to life's choices in the way Christ would. And we will be able increasingly to avoid the ironic pitfalls that otherwise could occur.

In addition to a daily reading of Scripture, a second suggestion is being willing to apply God's word to our life by faith. It is not enough to know God's word—we must be willing, by faith, to allow it to mold our lives.

Finally, we should come to God in prayer daily, confessing our sin with a repentant attitude.

When we refuse to follow these three basic biblical injunctions, we become rebellious, like David, and God often breaks down such rebellion by putting into motion his ironic justice.

These recommendations, which are really biblical commands, might seem simplistic to some Christians, but Christians are never too mature not to heed them. Indeed, the book of Proverbs repeatedly calls people "simple" and "naive" who don't continually pay heed to these recommendations. After getting married, my wife and I were preparing to leave our home in the United States to undertake theological study overseas. After the last worship service at our home church, an elderly Christian man gave some spiritual advice about my marriage. He told me, "You two seek the Lord through the word and prayer, and you won't have to worry about major problems in your relationship with each other." I recall thinking that while I appreciated the intent of his advice, it seemed elementary and therefore superficial. However, it is the best and truest advice that I have ever received. It is astonishingly difficult to stay consistently in God's word and prayer, especially as a couple, and it takes discipline to do so. Couples who don't so seek the Lord may think their relationship is good, but ironically it becomes spiritually worse the longer they neglect him. My wife and I have observed that the welfare of our relationship is directly

dependent on the degree to which we seek God through his word and prayer. We have noticed that when we neglect this, we are also neglecting the health of our relationship.

A Reflection on Ironic Judgment

My comments in the preceding section are most relevant for those who have trusted in Christ rather than themselves for their destiny. But what implications does the biblical idea of ironic judgment have for those who have not so committed their life? Scripture says, "Who has believed our message? . . . All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way" (Isa. 53:1, 6). We have walked in a way that is not good, following our own thoughts (Isa. 65:2), and as people "have chosen their own ways . . . so I [God] will choose their punishments" (Isa. 66:3–4). The Lord has "set before you the way of life and the way of death" (Jer. 21:8). "Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Consider your ways!'" (Hag. 1:5). "Let the wicked forsake His way. . . . 'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways'" (Isa. 55:7–8).

Consider that God has "made known . . . the ways of life" (Acts 2:28). For Jesus Christ is "the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through" him (John 14:6). Although "each of us has turned to his own way, . . . the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. . . . He was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of [God's] people to whom the stroke was due. . . . And He Himself bore the sin of many" on the cross (Isa. 53:6, 8, 12). Therefore, commit your way to the Lord Jesus Christ and do not forsake the Way (Acts 9:2), for Christ is the only one who is able to "guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:79).

In an age when many theologians believe that God's love means he could never ultimately send anyone to eternal hell, Jesus's words in Matthew 7 have never been more relevant:

> Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it. (vv. 13–14)

Learning from the Parable of the Frog

What so often seems to be the right way is the wrong way from God's viewpoint. The way that people think will lead to success and blessing really often leads to the opposite, failure and cursing. And frequently the sinful way that a person thinks will ensure that prosperity is the very way that secures the person's adversity. In other words, people are punished by the very means in which they attempt to get ahead (so Pharaoh, Haman, Saul, and Judas). And it is God who sees to it that a person's sinful ways to obtain good welfare are reversed, so that it becomes a one-way street at whose end is only affliction. God is always at work turning the apparent blessing of the wicked into actual cursing.

A person's ironic plight in life is too often like that of the unaware and contented frog, as narrated some years ago by the family counselor James Dobson:

> Nature has generously equipped most animals with a fear of things that could be harmful to them. Their survival depends on recognition of a particular danger in time to avoid it. But good old mother nature did not protect the frog quite so well; she overlooked a serious flaw in his early warning system that sometimes proves fatal. If a frog is placed in a pan of warm water under which the heat is being increased very gradually, he will typically show no inclination to escape. Since he is a cold-blooded creature, his body temperature remains approximately the same as the water around him and he does

> not notice the slow change taking place. As the temperature continues to intensify, the frog remains oblivious to his danger; he could easily hop his way to safety, but he is apparently thinking about something else. He will just sit there, contentedly peering over the edge of the pan while the steam curls ominously around his nostrils. Eventually the boiling frog will pass on to his reward, having succumbed to an unnecessary misfortune that he could easily have avoided.[14]

Like the frog, people are often content with their unbelieving ways, unaware that they will lead to destruction. Mankind also has a crucial flaw in his warning system against sin that can be fatal. All people are born under the influence of Adam's "original sin," which spiritually blinds them to the impending danger of their persistent sinful ways. As the frog, they have no inclination of "fleeing from the wrath to come" (Matt. 3:7). People could escape into the arms of Christ, but they apparently think their own way is at least as good.

If you haven't trusted in Christ, do not wait to flee into his arms from your burning plight, lest it become too late. Just as the steam begins to rise over the unsuspecting frog, so already upon the unbeliever "the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36), and presently "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against" him (Rom. 1:18). Such earthly wrath is but the simmering prelude to "their fire [that] shall not be quenched" (Isa. 66:24) and to "the smoke of their torment," which will go up forever and ever (Rev. 14:11). Being hard-hearted and insensitive to their perilous situation, they think they are on the road to happiness, when, on the contrary, they are headed only for despair. Is there an irony being played out in your life that may lead to destruction?

Truly, "there is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Prov. 14:12).

14. James Dobson, *Dare to Discipline* (New York: Bantam, 1982), 5.

"But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

MATTHEW 19:30

The Bible is full of ironic situations in which God overturns the world's wisdom by doing the opposite of what is expected—people are punished by their own sin, the persecution of the church is the catalyst for its growth, Paul claims to have strength through weakness, and more. In this book, biblical scholar G. K. Beale explores God's pattern of divine irony in both judgment and salvation, finding its greatest expression in Jesus's triumph over death through death on a cross. Unpacking this pattern throughout redemptive history, Beale shows us how God often uses what is seemingly weak and foolish to underscore his own strength and power in the lives of his people today.

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