

Lesson 21: Help the good and harm the bad.

Memory Verse: The children of your servants will live in your presence; their descendants will be established before you. (Psalm 102:28)

The idea in our title is so intuitive that a lot of people think that's how God works. And there are plenty of passages in Psalms where this idea is stated repeatedly.

But I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, "You are my God."
My times are in your hands;
deliver me from my enemies
and from those who pursue me
Let your face shine on your servant;
save me in your unfailing love.
Let me not be put to shame, O LORD,
for I have cried to you
but let the wicked be put to shame
and lie silent in the grave.
Let their lying lips be silenced,
for with pride and contempt
they speak arrogantly against the righteous. (Psalm 31:14-18)

Surely God will bring you down to everlasting ruin:
He will snatch you up and tear you from your tent;
he will uproot you from the land of the living.
The righteous will see and fear;
they will laugh at him, saying
"Here now is the man
who did not make God his stronghold
but trusted in his great wealth
and grew strong by destroying others!"

But I am like an olive tree
flourishing in the house of God;
I trust in God's unfailing love
for ever and ever. (Psalm 52:5-8)

May God arise, may his enemies be scattered;
may his foes flee before him.
As smoke is blown away by the wind,
may you blow them away;
as wax melts before the fire,
may the wicked perish before God.
But may the righteous be glad
and rejoice before God;
may they be happy and joyful. (Psalm 68:1-3)

One could use these texts alone and come to the conclusion that God always blesses those who please

him, and always does bad things to those who don't. But even in the Psalms we find passages that seem to say exactly the opposite.

Surely God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;
I had nearly lost my foothold.
For I envied the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
They have no struggles;
their bodies are healthy and strong.
They are free from the burdens common to man;
they are not plagued by human ills. (Psalm 73:1-5)

O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance;
they have defiled your holy temple,
they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble.
They have given the dead bodies of your servants
as food to the birds of the air,
the flesh of your saints to the beasts of the earth.
They have poured out blood like water
all around Jerusalem
and there is no one to bury the dead.
We are objects of reproach to our neighbors,
of scorn and derision to those around us. (Psalm 79:1-4)

So while many people teach that God blesses those he likes and curses those he doesn't like, the Bible has plenty of evidence that's not always the case. For example, that was the assumption that Job's friends made, leading them to accuse Job of sin when bad things happened to him. And Jesus taught that God did good things, like sending rain and sunshine, for the evil and the good. (Matthew 5:45)

What are we to make, then, of the passages that say God DOES bless the good and curse the evil? We have to understand them in the light of the "old" covenant, the covenant God made with Israel. This is most explicitly stated in Deuteronomy 28, the blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience.

Why would God work that way with one group of people and then announce he wouldn't do that any more? In part it's because God works with people at their level of maturity, which means different people need different approaches. A child needs rules to follow and at very least a system of rewards for good behavior. But as the child matures and learns the reasons for the rules, the rules become less important and the reward/punishment system may vanish entirely.

For example, a very young child may avoid playing in the street only because mother has threatened a spanking if he or she goes out in the street. An older child, however, understands that the rule was designed to prevent a tragedy and learns to plan his or her actions ahead to avoid dangerous situations. Mother's rule about not playing in the street isn't invalidated, but it isn't needed any more either.

Let's read on in the Psalm about the wicked doing well and see what conclusion the writer reached:

Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure;

in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.
All day long I have been plagued;
I have been punished every morning.
If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
I would have betrayed this generation of your children.
When I tried to understand all this,
it was too oppressive to me,
till I entered the sanctuary of God;
then I understood their final destiny. (Psalm 73:13-17)

NOTE: This Psalm is the first of a group of eleven attributed to Asaph. There are persons named Asaph noted in the Bible's historical account. However, the name means "collector" or "gatherer" and may refer to a role as much as to a person.

The author says it would have been wrong for him to say what he said about the wicked doing well if he hadn't included the last verse quoted. The sanctuary services were designed to teach the Israelites about the nature of sin and of God's plan to put an end to sin. So there the writer would have found that sin is its own punishment. While wicked people may prosper in this world in part because they are wicked, their sin will take their lives, and God will do his "strange" work and let it happen even though he doesn't want to.

So this Psalmist concludes:

Surely you place them on slippery ground;
you cast them down to ruin.
How suddenly they are destroyed,
completely swept away by terrors!
...
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever.
Those who are far from you will perish;
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.
But as for me, it is good to be near God.
I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge;
I will tell of all your deeds. (Psalm 73:18, 19, 26-28)

Possible thought papers:

1. Write about a time you were frustrated because someone seemed to get away with doing something wrong and your life was harder because you didn't do that wrong thing.
2. Have you ever heard someone say something that was true, but that probably wasn't a good thing for them to say because they had incomplete information?
3. Write a "Psalm" in a style you choose, about a time when God was good to you.