

## Surprising Fear

### Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 20, #5 January 30, 2005GG

*Why boastest thou thyself in mischief, O mighty man? the goodness of God endureth continually. Thy tongue deviseth mischiefs; like a sharp razor, working deceitfully. Thou lovest evil more than good; and lying rather than to speak righteousness. Selah. Thou lovest all devouring words, O thou deceitful tongue. God shall likewise destroy thee for ever, he shall take thee away, and pluck thee out of thy dwelling place, and root thee out of the land of the living. Selah. The righteous also shall see, and fear, and shall laugh at him: Lo, this is the man that made not God his strength; but trusted in the abundance of his riches, and strengthened himself in his wickedness. But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God: I trust in the mercy of God for ever and ever. I will praise thee for ever, because thou hast done it: and I will wait on thy name; for it is good before thy saints.? (Ps 52)*

The header to this psalm indicates that David wrote it at an unusually dark time in his life. Matthew Henry summarizes the occasion.

“The title is a brief account of the story which the psalm refers to. David now, at length, saw it necessary to quit the court, and shift for his own safety, for fear of Saul, who had once and again attempted to murder him. Being unprovided with arms and victuals, he, by a wile, got Ahimelech the priest to furnish him with both. Doeg an Edomite happened to be there, and he went and informed Saul against Ahimelech, representing him as confederate with a traitor, upon which accusation Saul grounded a very bloody warrant, to kill all the priests; and Doeg, the prosecutor, was the executioner, 1Sa 22:9, etc.”<sup>21</sup>[1]

We might view either Saul or Doeg as the “mighty man” of the psalm. Perhaps it best fits Doeg in his scheme to gain favor with Saul at the expense of the priests. By his manipulation of events and his bloody murder of many priests, Doeg thought to gain favor with Saul and to eliminate David. A thoughtful corollary in our own studies might be the perennial question of “gratuitous evil,” such black evil in events that unfold that we cannot imagine why a righteous and loving God would even permit their occurrence. More contemporary events that might stir such questions would include the Holocaust, the current murder of Christians in Africa, or the atrocities of the former Iraqi regime against the minority citizens of that country. To make God the cause of such events violates every tenet of Scripture that repeatedly denies that God causes them. Examples of Scripture’s categorical denial of God in any way causing sin include the following: “confusion”(1Co 14:33), “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1Jo 2:16), along with child sacrifice and Baal worship (Jer 7:31, especially when coupled with Jer 7:9-10 in which the people claimed that God caused them to commit such sins). To make God the actual cause of any sin, much less this irredeemably black category of sin, and then to claim that God is in some mystical way not really the “cause” of sin is logical nonsense and irrational, let alone unbiblical and blasphemous to the Biblical teaching on the character and work of God. How do you make intelligent sense of the allegation that God causes sin but really doesn’t cause it?

The more balanced attitude that sincerely wrestles with gratuitous evil categorically denies that God causes it, but addresses the “why” question. The fact that the sin is so black as to merit this term likely takes it beyond human ability to explain. Often non-Christians will raise the question of gratuitous evil as a primary objection to Christianity, but no other world view has any credible answers for the problem any more than Christians have. We need not know the reasons that God permits—not causes—any sin to believe the Bible or its consistent teaching regarding the holy character and conduct of God. Most of the people whom I have known who attempt to go down this inconsistent path spend a lot of time trying to convince others that they have some inside knowledge of the “secret will” of God, as if

God's secret will in some way contradicts His revealed will. Given the clear teaching of Scripture regarding the nature and conduct of God, we may reasonably and safely conclude that God's secret will in no way contradicts either His revealed will or His holy character as set forth throughout Scripture.

In this psalm David carries on a one-sided conversation with Doeg regarding the certain failure of his plot and God's certain judgment against all sin, however successful it may appear at the moment. Notice the many points that David makes to neutralize Doeg's temporary thought of success in his present evil.

God's goodness continually endures. It doesn't in any way fail when evil men seem for the moment to have succeeded in their sins.

God shall surely destroy ("beat down," marginal reading, not annihilate) sin in the end.

The righteous shall have the "last laugh."

In this context a rather surprising passage appears that relates to our present study of the fear of God. "The righteous also shall see, and fear, and shall laugh at him: Lo, this is the man that made not God his strength; but trusted in the abundance of his riches, and strengthened himself in his wickedness." The righteous see God's judgment against evil and "fear." If we read such words as "celebrate," or "rejoice," here, there would be no surprise. We'd hardly pause as we read over the sentence, but why the word "fear"? What about this scenario evokes "fear" in the righteous? Once again Matthew Henry offers thoughtful reflections on this idea.

"They shall reverence the justice of God, and stand in awe of him, as a God of almighty power, before whom the proudest sinner cannot stand and before whom therefore we ought every one of us to humble ourselves. Note, God's judgments on the wicked should strike an awe upon the righteous and make them afraid of offending God and incurring his displeasure."22[2]

D. A. Carson (*New Bible Commentary*) describes "fear" in this verse as "...a joyful response to the intervention of divine justice." Often Christians ponder how they shall react in the final judgment to God's sentence against the wicked, particularly if they see some of their former family or loved ones in that number. Although this passage doesn't specifically deal with the eternal state, it seems sufficiently clear that, when the righteous see things as God sees them, their first—and only—response harmonizes with God's. If we confront this implication of the passage in the setting of this life, surely we shall have no mixed emotions when we stand beside our Lord on that final Day of Judgment.

If in fact we view the term "fear" in this passage as referring to awe at God's incredible ability to deal with sinners of every stripe and in every situation, even when they appear at the moment to have succeeded, we discover the harmony and encouragement intended by the passage. Ah, my friends, how often have you and I faced inequities or evil deeds that impacted us personally and reacted with anger, frustration, confusion, and that nagging question, "Why, God, did you allow this evil to come my way?" David nudges us to back away from our human, emotional reaction to difficulties and to trust God in the most heated and difficult experiences of life. When you feel like a box of desert sand, it is indeed difficult to think of yourself as a "green olive tree in the house of God." How do we avoid this trap, or escape it when it traps us? David answers this question in the last verse. "I will praise thee for ever, because thou hast done it: and I will wait on thy name; for it is good before thy saints." We gain the upper hand on our emotional quagmires by refocusing our thoughts—and our trust—in our God. We don't deserve God's deliverance. We won't earn it. He will send it in due time because of His goodness.