

Why Do the Wicked Prosper?

Jeremiah 12 / Psalm 73

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God is not angered by sincere questions regarding His ways.

I. Even God's prophet was puzzled why the Lord allows evil people to prosper. (v. 12:1-2)

“Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

“These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.” (Mark 7:6)

Why do the wicked live on,
growing old and increasing in power?
They see their children established around them,
their offspring before their eyes.
Their homes are safe and free from fear;
the rod of God is not on them.
Their bulls never fail to breed;
their cows calve and do not miscarry.
They send forth their children as a flock;
their little ones dance about.
They sing to the music of timbrel and lyre;
they make merry to the sound of the pipe.
They spend their years in prosperity
and go down to the grave in peace.
Yet they say to God, ‘Leave us alone!
We have no desire to know your ways.
Who is the Almighty, that we should serve him?
What would we gain by praying to him?’ (Job 21:7-15)

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 common human burdens;
they are not plagued by human ills.
Therefore pride is their necklace;
they clothe themselves with violence.

From their callous hearts comes iniquity;
their evil imaginations have no limits.
They scoff, and speak with malice;
with arrogance they threaten oppression.
Their mouths lay claim to heaven,
and their tongues take possession of the earth.
And so the people are dismayed and confused,
drinking in all their words.
They say, "How would God know?
Does the Most High know anything?"
This is what the wicked are like—
always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.
Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure
and have washed my hands in innocence.
All day long I have been afflicted,
and every morning brings new punishments.
If I had spoken out like that,
I would have betrayed your children.
When I tried to understand all this,
it troubled me deeply
till I entered the sanctuary of God;
then I understood their final destiny.
Surely you place them on slippery ground;
you cast them down to ruin.
How suddenly are they destroyed,
completely swept away by terrors!
They are like a dream when one awakes;
when you arise, Lord,
you will despise them as fantasies.
When my heart was grieved
and my spirit embittered,
I was senseless and ignorant;
I was a brute beast before you.
Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me into glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
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 73:16-28)

II. We should pray for even our enemies' salvation, but it is not necessarily wrong to also pray that God will judge them as their sins deserve if they do not repent. (v. 3-4)

“Yet how often is the lamp of the wicked snuffed out?

How often does calamity come upon them,
the fate God allots in his anger?

How often are they like straw before the wind,
like chaff swept away by a gale?

You may well say, ‘God stores up the punishment of the wicked for their children.’

Let him repay the wicked, so that they themselves will experience it!

Let their own eyes see their destruction;

let them drink the cup of the wrath of the Almighty.

For what do they care about the families they leave behind

when their allotted months come to an end? (Job 21:17-21)

“I know that you can do all things;

no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?’

Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me to know.

“You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak;

I will question you,
and you shall answer me.’

My ears had heard of you

but now my eyes have seen you.

Therefore I despise myself

and repent in dust and ashes.” (Job 42:2-6)

My God, whom I praise,

do not remain silent,

for people who are wicked and deceitful

have opened their mouths against me;

they have spoken against me with lying tongues.

With words of hatred they surround me;

they attack me without cause.

In return for my friendship they accuse me,

but I am a man of prayer.

They repay me evil for good,

and hatred for my friendship.

Appoint someone evil to oppose my enemy;
let an accuser stand at his right hand.
When he is tried, let him be found guilty,
and may his prayers condemn him.
May his days be few;
may another take his place of leadership.
May his children be fatherless
and his wife a widow.
May his children be wandering beggars;
may they be driven from their ruined homes.
May a creditor seize all he has;
may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor.
May no one extend kindness to him
or take pity on his fatherless children.
May his descendants be cut off,
their names blotted out from the next generation.
May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the LORD;
may the sin of his mother never be blotted out.
May their sins always remain before the LORD,
that he may blot out their name from the earth.
For he never thought of doing a kindness,
but hounded to death the poor
and the needy and the brokenhearted.
He loved to pronounce a curse—
may it come back on him.
He found no pleasure in blessing—
may it be far from him.
He wore cursing as his garment;
it entered into his body like water,
into his bones like oil.
May it be like a cloak wrapped about him,
like a belt tied forever around him.
May this be the LORD's payment to my accusers,
to those who speak evil of me. (Psalm 109:1-20)

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:43-45)

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary:

“If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:17-21)

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been. (Revelation 6:9-11)

Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. (Romans 9:18)

By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:7-9)

Your kingdom come,
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:10)

III. God warns Jeremiah that things are only going to get worse. (v. 5-6)

IV. God declares that He is about to abandon His people to judgment. (v. 7-13)

Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: “The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.” We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test Christ, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. (1 Corinthians 10:5-14)

Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people. For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.

Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord at one time delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe. And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire. (Jude 1:3-7)

V. And yet, God also promises both mercy and final judgment. (v. 14-17)

Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?"

Even as the words were on his lips, a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes."

Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like the ox. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird.

At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever.

His dominion is an eternal dominion;

his kingdom endures from generation to generation.

All the peoples of the earth

are regarded as nothing.

He does as he pleases

with the powers of heaven

and the peoples of the earth.

No one can hold back his hand

or say to him: "What have you done?"

At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble. (Daniel 4:29-37)

A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed.

Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep.

At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?"

Daniel answered, "May the king live forever! My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, Your Majesty."

The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

At the king's command, the men who had accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lions' den, along with their wives and children. And before they reached the floor of the den, the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones.

Then King Darius wrote to all the nations and peoples of every language in all the earth:

"May you prosper greatly!

"I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel.

 "For he is the living God
 and he endures forever;
his kingdom will not be destroyed,
 his dominion will never end.
He rescues and he saves;
 he performs signs and wonders
 in the heavens and on the earth.
He has rescued Daniel
 from the power of the lions." (Daniel 6:25-27)

Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices;
 together they shout for joy.

When the LORD returns to Zion,
 they will see it with their own eyes.

Burst into songs of joy together,
 you ruins of Jerusalem,
for the LORD has comforted his people,
 he has redeemed Jerusalem.

The LORD will lay bare his holy arm
 in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth will see
 the salvation of our God. (Isaiah 52:8-10)