

Does God Destroy?

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A. As I see it, the crux of the author's problems is that he has discovered *one method* God uses *in probationary time* to discipline and punish sin. This mechanism he applies *to all forms of divine judicial punishment* including the final executive judgment and punishment for sin *after human probation*. Here, in my opinion, is one aspect of his view which is wrong, because it forces him to wrest some of the Scripture data to make it fit.

Secondly, it seems to me that he has bypassed those passages in Scripture and the Spirit of Prophecy that deal with the concepts of *God's justice* and *human accountability*. It is true that in one sense sin destroys itself, but it is also true that God's love is a holy love; justice is the other side of the coin. True love and justice are united. And justice requires adequate punishment of transgression and is not to be dismissed by the valid truth that sin destroys itself. The wicked man may die from his use of drugs, or an abused body may give up, or have a shoot-out with the law. And we may say he destroyed himself. But he still faces a judgment at the bar of God. He must give account (Rom 14:10-12; Acts 24:25). And he will be punished according to his deeds (2 Cor 5:10). God "will render to every man according to his deeds" (Rom 2:6). This will have to be an act of God. It can in no wise be due simply or only to a mechanism of withdrawal of His blessing and protection inasmuch as executive judgment takes place *after human probation* and those who stand under condemnation are both fallen angels as well as impenitent humanity.

B. In what legitimate senses may it be said that God does not destroy?

First, it may be said that God does not destroy the sinner *in the sense* that He does not arbitrarily cause anyone to be lost. Each person, using his free will, chooses for himself

whether he will serve and love God or disobey and be lost eternally. It is in this sense that Ellen White said, "God destroys no man. Everyone who is destroyed will have destroyed himself. Everyone who stifles the admonitions of conscience is sowing the seeds of unbelief, and these will produce a sure harvest" (*Christ's Object Lessons*, 84).

Second, it may be said that God does not destroy the sinner *in the sense* of consequences that result from a sinful life-style. This is the principle expressed in Galatians 6:7—we reap what we sow. It is reflected in the second commandment in which it is said that God "visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation" (Exod 20:5). We think of the law of heredity here which God has established. Violations of physical and moral law bring judgments and consequences. We cannot sin with impunity. This is the sense of Ellen White's statement when she says, "The sinner brings the punishment upon himself. His own actions start a train of circumstances that bring the sure result" (*Selected Messages*, Book. 1, 235).

Thirdly, it may be argued that God does not destroy the sinner *in the sense* that when His people reject Him and push away from Him, He withdraws His blessing and protection, and sinners are left to be pawns of Satan or subject to the destructive forces of their enemies. King Saul is one example on the personal level where Satan took over. Israel and Judah are examples where God withdrew His blessings and protection and the nations were left to the invasion of their foes.

These second and third senses are correct and are what the author has used to develop what he calls the mechanism by which God destroys: withdrawal of protection and blessing. He cites as "a key chapter" on this "The Destruction of Jerusalem" in *The Great Controversy*. He cites part of the following, but I will give the whole for context:

We cannot know how much we owe to Christ for the peace and protection which we enjoy. It is the restraining power of God that prevents mankind from passing fully under the

control of Satan. The disobedient and unthankful have great reason for gratitude for God's mercy and long-suffering in holding in check the cruel, malignant power of the evil one. But when men pass the limits of divine forbearance, that restraint is removed. God does not stand toward the sinner as an executioner of the sentence against transgression; but He leaves the rejectors of His mercy to themselves, to reap that which they have sown. Every ray of light rejected, every warning despised or unheeded, every passion indulged, every transgression of the law of God, is a seed sown which yields its unfailing harvest. The Spirit of God, persistently resisted, is at last withdrawn from the sinner, and then there is left no power to control the evil passions of the soul, and no protection from the malice and enmity of Satan. The destruction of Jerusalem is a fearful and solemn warning to all who are trifling with the offers of divine grace and resisting the pleadings of divine mercy. Never was there given a more decisive testimony to God's hatred of sin and to the certain punishment that will fall upon the guilty (*The Great Controversy*, 36).

We agree that the Bible does present this kind of mechanism (withdrawal of blessing and protection) as one of God's methods of executing judgment. *But it should be noted that this mechanism occurs during probationary time when Satan is active. This mechanism obviously cannot function after the reign of Satan has terminated.*

C. Other examples cited as evidence of the withdrawal protection/blessing mechanism:

1. Job. Here again we are dealing with probationary time. The issue is the great controversy between God and Satan and is really only tangential to the issue of divine punishment. In permitting Satan to exist and to develop his principles, it is necessary for God to permit, within limits, Satan's operations on both the good as well as the bad. The alleged insight that the "fire of God" fell on Job's sheep (Job 1:16) are the words of the servant, not of God or of inspiration. It would have been caused by Satan, but here again we are in probationary time when Satan is active.

2. God's Law. Although God's law forbids killing, it is evident from the biblical data that this is a moral law that forbids murder. It does not apply to judicial executions or ultimate executive justice. God alone is the fountain of life; as the Creator He can give life directly, or He can directly remove it in judicial execution. We must not misuse God's law and turn it against its Author. As the apostle says, "Is God unrighteous who taketh vengeance? (I speak as a man) God forbid: for then how shall God judge the world?" (1 Rom 3:5-6).

3. The testimony of Jesus.

a. Destruction of the works of Satan by revealing the truth about God is simply a figurative way of speaking. The actual revelation destroys nothing. But it makes that final destruction possible *with the consent of the intelligent universe*. It is the revelation of God's character and works in contrast to the works and character of Satan and the fruits of His principles that lead the intelligences of the universe to agree with God's judgment of sin.

b. The death of Jesus as an illustration of the mechanism God uses to destroy sin (withdrawal of blessing and protection).

I believe that here is another mistake the author makes: to equate the vicarious death of Christ for sinners with the execution death of an impenitent sinner. There are some similarities, but really not a one-to-one correspondence on all points. Christ's death was voluntary; He relinquished His life by choice (John 10:18). It is true that He bore the judgment of the Godhead on sin. God withdrew the sense of His presence. In some mysterious way the sin of the world of humanity was laid upon Him, imputed to Him (Isa 53:6; 1 Peter 2:24). His death was vicarious or substitutionary in nature ("For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust," 1 Peter 3:18). He was sinless Himself (2 Cor 5:21). He was in perfect union with His Father. Knowing His Father so intimately, He feared the separation would be eternal. The mental anguish of the divine rejection was so fearful (because He knew the Father so well) it broke His heart.

But the impenitent sinner will not be in such a position after the close of probation. He is

not dying for others. He is not in union with God. Rather, he has stifled the Spirit's appeal; he has hardened his heart against his Maker. He will be punished according to his deeds and then deprived of his life. The sufferings of the Christ would have been the same for one as it was for the race. The destruction of the sinner will involve the total annihilation of the person (Matt 10:28), and no resurrection will follow. But Christ's body was not destroyed, and He arose again.

Biblical Data on a Direct Action of the Creator (Judicial Execution)

Although the destruction of the wicked is referred to as God's "strange act" (Isa 28:21), true justice demands proper punishment and execution. *After probation* there is no evidence that a mechanism of withdrawal of blessing and protection functions. The angels see no injustice or taint in God's character in His direct punishment of the wicked. The seven last plagues ("in them is filled up the wrath of God," Rev 15:1) must be by God's direct action. Sin is not a mechanism to produce them; Satan cannot produce them (God and Satan are not copartners). These are judgments that God produces by whatever operation of His laws He chooses. In the third plague (rivers and fountains turned to blood) the angel says, "Thou art righteous, O Lord, which art, and wast, and shalt be, because thou hast judged thus. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink; for they are worthy." And another heavenly voice responds, "Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments" (Rev 16:5-7).

Executive justice will punish the impenitent according to their deeds. This punitive judgment would have to be imposed, it could not come simply as a natural result of sin, nor as a simple withdrawal of divine protection. Ellen White writes:

Then they [the saints] meted out to the wicked *the portion which they must suffer*, according to their works; and it was written against their names in the book of death. Satan

also and his angels were judged by Jesus and the saints. *Satan's punishment was to be far greater than that of those whom he had deceived. His suffering would so far exceed theirs as to bear no comparison with it. After all those whom he had deceived had perished, Satan was still to live and suffer on much longer. (Early Writings, 291, emphasis added; cf. The Great Controversy, 661)*

Satan rushes into the midst of his followers and tries to stir up the multitude to action. But fire from God out of heaven is rained upon them, and the great men, and mighty men, the noble, the poor and miserable, are all consumed together. I saw that *some were quickly destroyed, while others suffered longer. They were punished according to the deeds done in the body. Some were many days consuming, and just as long as there was a portion of them unconsumed, all the sense of suffering remained. Said the angel, "The worm of life shall not die; their fire shall not be quenched as long as there is the least particle of it to prey upon."*

Satan and his angels suffered long. Satan bore not only the weight and punishment of his own sins, but also of the sins of the redeemed host, which had been placed upon him; and he must also suffer for the ruin of souls which he had caused. Then I saw that Satan and all the wicked host were consumed, and the justice of God was satisfied; and all the angelic host, and all the redeemed saints, with a loud voice said, "Amen!" (Early Writings, 294-95, emphasis added)

This is judicial punishment. This is a matter of justice. It would have to be a direct act of the Judge of all the earth. Satan and his hosts cannot come in on this as a part of the mechanism since they are also the object of this punishment. It is more than a withdrawal of mercy and protection or even of life itself inasmuch as in that case the sinner would die instantly. But the biblical data and that of Ellen White indicate that the impenitent will be punished according to their deeds *before* being deprived of life. This is simple justice that God the righteous Judge must not only impose, but must carry out. It will not do simply to say

that He withdraws the operation of this law or that one. Whatever the mechanism by which God will employ to bring about this destruction, He will have to be the One to employ it. God's methods employed to discipline His people in probationary time really cannot be imposed on His method of carrying out final executive justice.

In the long view, however, it is really not a specific method that should concern us, but the results. When the plan is finished, and God's mercy and justice have been displayed, all the intelligent creation will say, "*Great and marvelous are Thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are Thy ways, Thou King of saints.*"

One more thing should be said. It would appear from the Scriptures that God has performed some executive acts of justice during probationary time as warnings to the wicked.

1. The Flood. This was a direct intervention of God. While His Spirit was withdrawn because of the resistance of the antediluvians, their physical destruction was not due to His withdrawal of His protection and blessing or by the actions of Satan or invasions by enemies such as happened to Judah and Jerusalem. The author *speculates* that God withdrew Himself and consequently the sun and moon underwent drastic changes (because He wasn't actively upholding the laws of nature) and so the great body of water in the firmament came down. Since "the controlling protective, sustaining power over the elements was no longer present . . . one great upheaval occurred" (p. 14).

This is simply playing with words and indicates the extremes one must go to in order to extend some of God's methods of discipline in probationary time to the area of executive justice at the end of the age. Here the author is forced to admit that God brought about the destruction of the wicked directly. If God had given up control of the forces of this earth, even Noah and his family would have perished. But God was in control. We really don't know how God caused the Flood to take place, but He caused it. The author's argument is like saying that the executioner who presses the button doesn't execute the criminal in the chair-the electricity does it! There is a failure here to realize the proper place of justice in holy love. The executive

justice of the divine Judge is not incompatible with His love.

The point I wish to make here is that the Flood is taken as an example of the judicial execution of God on the impenitent which foreshadows the ultimate execution of the impenitent by fire at the end of the age (2 Peter 3:5-7).

2. Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:24). Here again the ruin of these two cities and their inhabitants is not by a mechanism of withdrawal on God's part, nor was it by Satan or their enemies. This is an instance of direct destruction which is viewed by the Bible writers as a warning of the ultimate destruction of the impenitent at the end (Jude 7; 2 Peter 2:6). It is immaterial to speculate what laws God permitted to operate or to fail to operate to produce the fire and brimstone that destroyed these sinful rebels.

3. Finally, there may be examples of direct judgments by God in individual cases: Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1-2). "There went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord." Uzzah (2 Sam 6:7). Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10). Elymas (Acts 13:8-11).

What the author has come to, so it seems to me, is an overbalance on a point that he feels is necessary to maintain in order to justify the character of God. The executive justice of God after the close of probation seems to him to mar His character, so he has attempted to impose one of God's methods of dealing out justice in probationary time to His final acts of executive justice. It is unfortunate that the author magnifies the mechanism of punishment out of all proportion. But the viewpoint doesn't really fit the information provided for us in the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy and results in a distortion of divine justice and ultimately portrays a distortion of God's character.

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