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The Trouble with Inferring Divine Punishment: A Response to James S. Spiegel

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In a recent JBTS article, “It’s the Wrath of God’: Reflections on Inferring Divine Punishment,” James S. Spiegel considers whether we can be justified in believing that events in our lives and the lives of others are instances of divine punishment.¹ His stated aim is to answer the skeptical thesis – “the view that all assertions of divine wrath since biblical times are speculative at best and perhaps even irresponsible.”² In other words, he argues that an event’s being in the Bible is not a necessary condition for concluding that it is an instance of divine punishment. He proposes three sufficient conditions that justify ascriptions of divine wrath. The conditions are as follows:

- A. the occurrence of a miracle;
- B. extraordinary coincidence; or
- C. fulfilled bold prediction.³

He admits that applying these conditions will not produce the same level of confidence we have in identifying cases of divine punishment in Scripture, and he stresses that we must be cautious lest we slander God by ascribing to him intentions he does not have. I interpret Spiegel’s emphasis on caution here not as tentativeness with regards to the strength of his conditions but only as a reminder that we should not rush to conclusions when it comes to assertions about God.

Does Spiegel successfully argue against the skeptical thesis? To answer this question, I examine the case of Job, a case of non-punitive, divinely-ordained suffering. In the failure of Job’s friends to interpret Job’s suffering correctly, we learn that ascribing meaning to the suffering of others is fraught with difficulty. I argue that Spiegel’s conditions would not have helped Job’s friends and hence also fail to undermine the skeptical thesis. This is not to surrender to skepticism, for Scripture does teach that one of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to convict us of sin, which might be in conjunction with pain and suffering. Nevertheless, the Bible contains no

1. James S. Spiegel, “It’s the Wrath of God’: Reflections on Inferring Divine Punishment,” *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies*, 4, no. 2 (2019): 301-16.

2. Spiegel, “It’s the Wrath of God,” 311.

3. Spiegel, “It’s the Wrath of God,” 312.

promises that God will always disclose his reasons, especially when it comes to the suffering of others.

The Case of Job

Consider the case of Job. Job experiences tremendous suffering, having lost nearly everything in his life. He is unable, at first, to understand why he suffers, but he trusts that God has a good reason. His so-called “friends” think they know the reason: God is punishing Job for his sins. Stephen Kepnes recounts:

The friends [of Job], according to Buber, follow “the assertion of an all-embracing empirical connection between sin and punishment”...In Bildad’s words: “Will God pervert the right? Will the Almighty pervert justice? If your sons sinned against Him, He dispatched them for their transgression” (8:3-5). Suffering is punishment; and since Job suffers, he must have sinned as well. Thus Eliphaz [another friend of Job] turns on Job: “You know that your wickedness is great. And that your iniquities have no limit” (22:5).⁴

Job’s friends say it is God’s wrath, but as the book of Job makes clear, they are mistaken. God is not punishing Job; rather, his sufferings are due to a wager that the devil makes with God, which God uses to show just how great a man Job is. God is proud of Job, not angry with him.

Job’s case shows just how difficult it is to ascribe meaning to the suffering of others. Kepnes says,

The friends’ justifications protect their wish to believe that the world follows the order of retributive justice. God is just and in control; and thus those who suffer deserve their plight and those who thrive and succeed deserve their success. That the response of the friends to suffering is weak is made crystal clear at the end of the text when God declares that they “have not spoken the truth about me” (42:7).⁵

Job’s friends fail to interpret Job’s suffering correctly because their mistaken theology describes God’s sole *modus operandi* as retributive punishment.

What happens when we apply Spiegel’s conditions to Job’s situation and the judgments of his friends? Consider the first condition – the occurrence of a miracle – which states that one might be justified in the ascription of divine wrath if the event is miraculous. In Job 1:16, the author describes a miraculous event: fire drops from heaven and consumes Job’s sheep and servants. This form of destruction is similar to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, which is, as Spiegel describes, “special” or miraculous, as opposed to an occurrence in accord with natural law. So,

4. Steven Kepnes, “Rereading Job as Textual Theodicy,” in *Suffering Religion*, ed. Robert Gibbs and Elliot R. Wolfson (New York: Routledge, 2002), 44.

5. Kepnes, “Rereading Job,” 44-45 (emphasis added).

this condition supports Job's friends in their mistaken conclusion that the cause of Job's misfortune is divine wrath.

Spiegel's other conditions also fail when applied to Job. It is quite an extraordinary coincidence that the events of the first chapter of Job happen simultaneously. First, his flocks are stolen and his servant killed by the Sabeans.⁶ Second, fire burns up a flock of sheep and more of Job's servants.⁷ Third, his camels are stolen by the Chaldeans, and more of Job's servants are killed.⁸ Fourth, his children are killed when their house is knocked down by a strong wind.⁹ Nevertheless, as we learn in the narrative of the first chapter, God's intention is not to punish Job, so Spiegel's second condition is not sufficient either.

Spiegel's third condition is the occurrence of a bold prediction, such as in the New Testament case of the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira,¹⁰ especially with Sapphira's death.¹¹ Although there are no predictions in Job's story, we can imagine Job's narrative including one without changing the outcome. For example, imagine if one of Job's friends had mysteriously predicted Job's suffering. Such a prediction would be compatible with the rest of the story playing out as it does, but Job's friends would still be wrong about God's intentions. So, it turns out that Spiegel's conditions are not sufficient for justifying belief in the occurrence of divine punishment.

Spiegel's conditions do, on the other hand, justify an inference to a supernatural explanation, for who could reasonably deny that a miraculous event, like fire from heaven that is also predicted and extraordinarily coincidental, has for its explanation a supernatural cause? However, correctly inferring a supernatural cause is not the same as identifying the intention, for there are many reasons God might have for allowing a particular event to occur. When someone experiences suffering, it is not always because of divine wrath.¹² Consider the following possible reasons:

1. to allow us to share in Christ's sufferings;¹³
2. to make us more complete in character, i.e. more Christ-like;¹⁴
3. to provide us opportunities in life;¹⁵

6. Job 1:15.

7. Job 1:16.

8. Job 1:17.

9. Job 1:18-19.

10. Acts 5:1-11.

11. Acts 5:9.

12. Spiegel defines punishment as a "severe divine response to human sin" (Spiegel, "It's the Wrath of God," 307). While he admits that divine punishment can be understood as redemptive and not just retributive, it seems that several of the reasons that follow have nothing to do with sin.

13. 2 Corinthians 1:5; Philippians 3:10; 1 Peter 4:12-13.

14. James 1:2-3; 1 Peter 1:6-7.

15. Genesis 50:20; 2 Corinthians 1:4.

4. to grow the community of believers;¹⁶

5. to show the works of God;¹⁷

6. and to test his followers or boast about them (as with Job).

The Bible describes many reasons God might use suffering for his glory and our good, and a set of conditions for identifying instances of divine wrath ought to be sensitive to the various possibilities.

The Empathy Condition

Perhaps Job's friends fail simply because they lack empathy – they do not know him well enough. Kepnes says,

The severity of [Job's] punishment is incommensurate with his crimes. *The friends miss this*; they are blind to the extent of Job's suffering. They are 'mischievous comforters' (16:2) who make it more and not less difficult for Job to endure his pain. . . Like passive bystanders to the suffering of the innocent, the friends are mainly concerned with providing quick rationalizations for Job's plight that will allow them to dismiss their own responsibility to help him.¹⁸

If they had been familiar with his character, they might have avoided their epistemic mistake and been more compassionate, as well. Let us call this the empathy condition: *before ascribing divine wrath to explain the suffering of others, one ought to have a comprehensive understanding of their circumstances*. Maybe Spiegel has such a condition in mind when he briefly refers to additional "stringent standards."¹⁹ As a necessary condition, an empathy requirement would remind us that epistemic caution is a virtue and that the act of judging others is prone to error.²⁰ Job calls out his friends' lack of empathy when he defends himself. He says, "Far be it from me to say that you are right; till I die I will not put away my integrity from me. I hold fast to my righteousness and will not let it go; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days."²¹ Job understands himself and his circumstances better than his friends do.

However, satisfying the empathy condition, even if possible, is not sufficient for inferring divine wrath, for it is not enough to know that others deserve punishment to know that God is punishing them. First, as any Christian knows that has followed

16. 2 Timothy 9-10.

17. John 9:2-3.

18. Kepnes, 44-45. Italics mine. Romans 3:23 says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." This would include Job, too, but aside from God rebuking Job for speaking presumptuously (Job 40), nowhere in the book of Job does the author speak of Job's sins. The point is that Job does not deserve this suffering.

19. Spiegel, 314.

20. Romans 14:4.

21. Job 27:5-6.

Jesus for a modest amount of time, God does not convict us of some sins until much later, even sins that we continue to commit. Perhaps God knows that we would be overwhelmed and crushed if the depth of our sin were revealed to us. For whatever reason, simply knowing that others continue to sin and are deserving of punishment does not justify one in believing that God is punishing them. Second, there are no guarantees that God punishes every sin in this life. Some sins may not be punished until the afterlife,²² which may explain why it appears evil and unrighteous people sometimes do not get what they deserve. Third, according to the penal substitutionary view of the atonement, Jesus atoned for sin on the cross; therefore, those who are found in Christ are not punished for their sins. At most, they experience discipline.²³

The Work of the Holy Spirit

According to the Gospel of John, one of the Holy Spirit's functions is the conviction of sin: "And when [the Spirit] comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment."²⁴ This is related to the doctrine of divine illumination, which says that the Holy Spirit works in believers as they read the pages of Scripture to understand and apply it;²⁵ this teaching is summarized in Article V of the Chicago Statement of Biblical Hermeneutics: "We affirm that the Holy Spirit enables believers to appropriate and apply Scripture to their lives."²⁶

The conviction of sin is not the conclusion of a deductive argument or the satisfying of a set of sufficient conditions; rather it is an awareness of one's spiritual condition communicated by God through the Holy Spirit. It is person-to-person communication. God is a person, and as such, he chooses to communicate when he so desires, as Job's narrative shows. The Spirit dwells within believers. In 2 Corinthians 2:10-16, Paul writes, "These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God... 'For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ."²⁷ According to one interpretation, "[This passage describes] the Spirit searching the depths of God (v. 10), not because he does not know the mind of God – for the Holy

22. Matthew 25:31-46.

23. Romans 3:21-26. While Christians are not punished for their sins, they are still disciplined (Hebrews 12:6), but it is doubtful whether discipline can be inferred, using a formula or necessary and sufficient conditions.

24. John 16:8.

25. 1 Corinthians 3:16; John 16:7, 8, 13; John 14:26.

26. International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, "Chicago Statement of Biblical Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 25, no. 4 (December 1982): 397-401.

27. 2 Corinthians 2:11, 16.

Spirit is God – but in order to grant to us the understanding that the Lord wants us to have.”²⁸ The doctrines of divine illumination and the indwelling Spirit establish that God has provided a way to hear him, a way that makes knowing his intentions possible, at least in principle.²⁹

Spiegel appears to address this possibility under the category of “personal divine revelation,” although he speaks here of understanding events in both one’s own life and the lives of others.³⁰ He says,

Unlike the additional corroborating factors I posed above, personal religious experiences have an irreducibly subjective dimension which properly invites public scrutiny. Passing such scrutiny, it seems reasonable to suppose that such experiences might provide similarly corroborating grounds for inferring divine wrath in a given case. But, alas, establishing the veridicality of such extraordinary personal religious experiences is a very difficult thing to do. So grounding a claim of special divine wrath in this way only pushes a significant justificatory burden back one step.³¹

Spiegel is right to stress the “irreducibly subjective dimension” of religious experiences, and he is right in saying that these experiences are not necessarily unjustified just because they are subjective. In fact, a personal revelation of this sort is just what we should expect given the theology of the Holy Spirit. It is this direct communication from God himself that justifies the beliefs it produces in a basic way, not entirely different from the way that warrant is acquired by beliefs produced by the *sensus divinitatis* in Reformed Epistemology.³²

A distinction that Spiegel should stress then is between the justificatory demands of ascribing meaning to one’s own suffering, on the one hand, and the demands of ascribing meaning to the suffering of others, on the other hand. It is one thing to interpret events in one’s own life as instances of divine wrath; this fits well with a biblically-based understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit and requires no further “justificatory burden.” It is quite another thing to interpret such events in the lives of others for their sake. First, the examples of this kind in Scripture are limited to a special class of God’s people: prophets and apostles.³³ Second, such ascriptions are so prone to abuse given the human inclination to assert power over others that we ought to be very skeptical of any person who suggests he speaks for God about such

28. “Divine Illumination,” Ligonier Ministries, accessed February 2, 2020, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/divine-illumination/>.

29. Sometimes even individuals who are close to God endure suffering or the dark night of the soul without knowing why. Job is the best example of this.

30. Spiegel, “It’s the Wrath of God,” 313. I understand divine illumination to be a type of special revelation.

31. Spiegel, “It’s the Wrath of God,” 313.

32. For more on this, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

33. 2 Samuel 12, 1 Corinthians 11:30.

matters. This is not to rule out the possibility of the spiritual gift of prophecy.³⁴ It just means that we ought to be cautious in the use of such gifts lest we harm others and, as Spiegel warns, slander God.³⁵

While God does communicate via the Holy Spirit about his intentions, there is no guarantee that he will actually do so. For his own reasons and for our sake, he may keep his intentions hidden from us, and though the Holy Spirit is the one who convicts us of sin, it does not follow that he will make us aware of every sin in our lives, as mentioned above. In short, being close to God is not a sufficient condition for knowing the reason for our suffering. As Job's case shows, God does not always reveal his intentions even to the greatest of saints; moreover, there is no rational formula for doing this. Spiegel is right to critique the skeptical thesis, but his conditions for identifying divine wrath are not sufficient.

34. 1 Corinthians 12:10. I just want to emphasize here that I do not mean to dismiss the gift of prophecy altogether. I just want to stress that we ought to exercise extreme caution when it comes to the contemporary use of such gifts, comparing prophetic claims to the witness of Scripture.

35. One test for authentic prophecy is found in 1 John 4:1-3.

