

The Judgment of God

“This is the genealogy of Noah. Noah was a just man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God. And Noah begot three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. So God looked upon the earth, and indeed it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. And God said to Noah, “The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth. “Make yourself an ark of gopherwood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and outside with pitch...”

-Genesis 6:9-14

In this section of Scripture we come in contact with God’s first act of divine judgment executed upon the corrupt culture that filled the earth during the time of Noah. I do feel the need to point out that this particular passage is a vital point of debate amongst believers surrounding the topic of the age of the earth. This debate is held between old earth creationists (Christians who believe that the early chapters of Genesis are historical, but highly symbolic and not meant to be taken absolutely literally, so they maintain that the age of the earth is more consistent with what modern scientists would proclaim) and young earth creationists (Christians who take a more literal view of Genesis and so believe that the earth is actually only a few thousand years old.) And this passage in specific is fundamental to this debate.

For young earth creationists, they have to give an account for why the earth gives the appearance of being so old, both in the geological layering in the earth’s crust, and the extensive fossil record. This story is the main way that young earth creationists are able to answer this question. They believe that if a global flood occurred, this would be such a catastrophic event that it would give the appearance of age to these geologic records without requiring billions of years to develop. While the old earth creationists see this as a local flood, no less catastrophic to human society, but limited to the area of the middle east. While I do find this debate interesting, and there is much more information on it if you are interested, I won’t be focusing this paper on that debate. Instead I will look at the flood as a way of understanding the judgment of God itself, both at a societal and individual level.

Is God’s Judgment Just?

“Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.”

-Romans 12:19

It is interesting to note that in our modern culture, the concept of God's judgment is seen as unjust, and, in light of passages like this, many accuse God of being tyrannical or barbaric. For most of human history, it was an assumed fact that the gods judged the earth and had the right to do so. This is why, in most pagan religions, there was a form of the flood story contained in their texts, and the surprising thing to them was not that the gods flooded the earth, but instead that they let anyone live. For instance, in the epic of Gilgamesh, the hero of the story, Gilgamesh, encounters a man named Utnapishtim who recounts a story in which the gods sent a flood in order to wipe out all of mankind, but he was warned by one particular god, Ea, to build a boat and survive it with his family.

This is an aside to what we are talking about, but I want to quickly address the claim that the biblical flood story was stolen from the epic of Gilgamesh. The similarities in this story would either be a result of copying, or a result of a real historic, and symbolic importance to this particular narrative, shared amongst cultures without copying. Meaning that if you saw two different movies about a giant boat built by men, named the Titanic, that was supposed to be unsinkable and then sank as a result of hitting an iceberg, you wouldn't think that they were plagiarizing off of one another, but instead that they were giving different accounts of the same historical event. If the flood actually happened, and its symbolic meaning is present in the conscience of men, you would expect that every subsequent culture of man would contain some version of this event in their texts, and that is precisely what we see.

I could say more on that, but let's get back to the point, for the pagan account of the flood story, the gods, more or less, arbitrarily flood the earth to wipe out man, and one man escapes against the will of the gods. This wasn't seen as unjust, or as cruel, but instead as being within the power, and the rights of the gods and it should not be questioned. Because ancient man was completely dependent on nature to survive, they had an innate humility and confidence in the divine that is sorely lacking today. As a result, we are the first culture in which even the religious openly critique the sovereignty of God. And many believe that a God who judges in this way would not be one worthy of worship, but instead would be cruel and vindictive.

Why Does God Judge The Earth?

"Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

-Genesis 18:25

Unfortunately, this short-sighted idea is missing a key point that I think is illustrated very well by the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf in his book "Exclusion and Embrace".

“My thesis is that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance...My thesis will be unpopular with man in the West...But imagine speaking to people (as I have) whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned, and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit...Your point to them—we should not retaliate? Why not? I say—the only means of prohibiting violence by us is to insist that violence is only legitimate when it comes from God...Violence thrives today, secretly nourished by the belief that God refuses to take the sword...It takes the quiet of a suburb for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence is a result of a God who refuses to judge. In a scorched land—soaked in the blood of the innocent, the idea will invariably die, like other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind...if God were NOT angry at injustice and deception and did NOT make a final end of violence, that God would not be worthy of our worship.”

-Miraslov Volf - Exclusion and Embrace

In other words, it is a result of the relative stability and prosperity of the modern west that allows for us to believe that judgment is an unimportant attribute for God to have. But in areas of the world who don't enjoy this stability, in places where war is more common and lawlessness is ubiquitous, this belief has never taken root, nor could it. Genuine evil demands retribution, and if our God will not judge the sinner, then we have no capacity to forgive those who have sinned against us. But, if our God is just, and He will judge those who have wronged us, this frees us up to forgive those who have harmed us, and entrust their judgment to the God who will judge in righteousness.

This belief is also a modern day corruption of the gospel message. In the gospel, man for the first time encountered a God who did not judge, but instead gave Himself up to judgment. This put in the minds of the early Christians the idea that the guilty could be redeemed, and that mercy ought to reign in this world. But in embracing this idea, we have forgotten that the mercy of God is, by definition, unearned and received by us in spite of the fact that we are deserving of God's wrath.

“...among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.”

-Ephesians 2:3

We live in a culture that has widely sterilized the brutality of this world, to the point where most of us will only be exposed to the truly horrific manifestations of evil through our television screens. And in this peace we have forgotten something that ancient man

was well aware of, and that is that human beings are capable of some truly monstrous deeds. This is one thing that the Nephilim represent. These monstrous, inhuman giants represent what man can become when we sin against our conscience enough. While we are made in the image of God, we can sin against our inner conscience so much that we eventually silence its voice in our lives. When we do this, we can be more closely related to an animal than an actual human.

Except, when we are in the grip of our evil and malevolence, we are actually worse than animals. Animals can be bloody and violent, but always with a cause. It is only men who are capable of genuine sadism and cruelty. It is this understanding that has been lost in our current cultural moment. We have been widely taught today that evil is a result of inequity. That men are basically good, but through unjust circumstances, they have resorted to violence and criminality, and if only they would be given another chance, they could be reformed. This philosophy of criminal justice has put a greater emphasis on the good of the criminal than on the good of the society.

“And He said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground.”

-Genesis 4:10

While the Christian ought to share the heart of God for the redemption of all men, we can’t do this at the sacrifice of innocent people. The purpose of justice is not to reform the wicked, but to punish the evil that was done. Notice that God confronts Cain, not for the express purpose of redeeming him, but instead to call him to account for the blood of Abel. God desires repentance, but repentance can only come through an internal conviction of wrong.

The law is what brings man to recognize our need for grace. If you remove the law, if you emphasize reform over retribution, you ironically remove the impetus for repentance that could lead to redemption. This creates an entitlement mentality within a culture that only sees the law as an inconvenience and not a description of a divine law that will eventually judge them in an ultimate sense. But if you focus justice on the punishment of crime, you actually do leave room for real repentance done for genuine sorrow over legitimate wrong. It is through enforcement of the law that man can recognize the authority of the law, and through that authority can reason up to the divine authority that gave power to the law in the first place.

Think as a parent. Your goal of parenting should be to train the character of your child so that they might choose the good for themselves. But no child does this by nature, they must be trained in their conscience through the enforcement of rules. Without this

enforcement, children will naturally bend towards entitlement and selfishly choose the wrong when it suits their needs. It is punishment that restrains the behavior, even of the unrepentant child. While restraining the sin of your child is a good thing, it isn't the end of parenting, it is merely the means. The end is that the child will eventually see the divine law shining through the structure that you as the parent provide for them. When they recognize this, they should seek to conform, not merely their actions, but their souls to this law that they might live for the good of God and not merely to avoid consequences.

"Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor."

-Galatians 3:24-25

The law is a tutor to our souls, it communicates the wrong of sin that we might be brought into forgiveness and repentance through the grace of God. So the modern criminal reformers who speak of the cruelty of prison are right when they say that the law can't change the heart. This is correct, the law has a tendency of producing a legalistic society when it is seen as an end. But, when it has its proper place, when it stands as a tutor of the conscience, then it can restrain the heartless, while providing the structure to reform those who are willing.

"Hell and Destruction are never full; So the eyes of man are never satisfied."

-Proverbs 27:20

Another thing that we forget today, is that evil tends to be insatiable. When a person gives into their depravity, some will console themselves in the belief that this behavior is "just a phase", but the more we condition our souls to evil, the more they will produce evil. We also know from studying societies like Germany under the Nazi regime, that this is true at a societal level as well. We may stand in shock at what the Nazi's were able to do, but we forget that this road to hell was paved one brick at a time. It began with slow erosion of moral precepts at the top that slowly permeated the culture until it became so corrupt, that even the average citizens participated in their wickedness. The cruelty practiced by cultures like this is so severe, so incredible, that if they would not be stopped, they would legitimately end the world in their barbarity. This was the state of the world when God sent the flood.

"The the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that ever intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."

-Genesis 6:5

And yet, men in all our evil are still capable of genuine virtue and goodness. This is what it means to be made in God's image. While we are fallen, there is enough of God's image in us that we are both worthy of, and capable of genuine redemption by God. But this redemption is an act of divine grace not justice. If God were to truly give to men what we deserve, He would have wiped us out right after the fall. But, God in His mercy chose to preserve Adam and Eve, and then Noah, knowing that by doing this, He would eventually have to become man and sacrifice Himself in order to atone for the evil and wickedness of mankind. However, this grace is only received as grace by those who understand their need for it. For those who feel entitled to salvation, they will never appreciate the gift of God, and instead unjustly condemn God when He judges the earth.

So while the flood of God was just, and the vengeance of God was right in response to what man was doing, it was also necessary so that anyone could be saved. To put it another way, if God would not have sent the flood, even Noah would have been devoured by the wickedness of the society that he was in. In fact, this is how the book of Enoch puts it:

“Destroy all wrong from the face of the earth and let every evil work come to an end, and let the plant of righteousness and truth appear, and it shall prove a blessing; the works of righteousness and truth shall be planted in truth and joy for evermore.”

-Enoch 4:15

God does judge the earth, but not out of cruelty or indifference for mankind, but instead He judges the earth like a surgeon who attempts to remove a cancer. The surgeon has to cut into their patient, he has to draw blood and agony from the one that he is trying to save, not out of cruelty, but out of compassion. The evil of man is not inherent to this world, it is a corruption, an aberration to the creation and the nature of man. God who is just, but also loving, has an intent to judge the evil of man, that He might save man. That is what Christ did. By taking the form of man, He made a way for God to judge the evil of mankind in His Son, while allowing us to believe in Him and be saved from our sins. And for those who reject this salvation, they unfortunately become a part of the corruption that God must wash away in order for justice to remain on this earth.

“For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly; and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly; and delivered righteous Lot, who was

oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds)—then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who walk according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness and despise authority. They are presumptuous, self-willed. They are not afraid to speak evil of dignitaries...

-2 Peter 2:4-10

How God Judges

Now that we have a better understanding as to why God judges, we must now look to the methods of God's judgment. In order to do this, we will first look at God's judgment of the earth in a broad sense, God's judgment of societies, and finally God's judgment of individuals, both the saved and the unsaved.

God's Natural Judgment

"For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope..."

-Romans 8:20

For the most part, the evil and the tragedy that exist on this earth are not done through a specific act of God's judgment, but instead a result of being a part of a fallen and sinful world. In the beginning, after the fall of man, God had two options, to fully abandon mankind to hell, or to remove His presence from this earth just enough so that He didn't have to judge man immediately, but enough so that His hiddenness could be felt by the creation. We are thankful to God that He chose the latter over the former, but this means that we are in a world that is subject to "futility". This means that all things grow old, decay, and die.

Beyond that, we live in a world in which God does not immediately judge evil. As a result, men are free to commit grave and wicked sins without God stopping them, and without them facing immediate divine judgment. Through these two facts, we see the proliferation of natural evil that subjects us to things like hurricanes and cancer, and human evil that leaves us vulnerable to malice and injustice.

"Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted."

-Isaiah 53:4

This passage is specifically about Jesus, but it shows us an interesting point. Men innately believe all tragedy to be a result of judgment. And so when Jesus suffered, many assumed that His suffering was a result of divine judgment and never thought that it was a result of human evil. So in the sense that all suffering is a result of God's hidden nature due to the fall of man, all suffering is a result of divine judgment, but at a more real level, most suffering that we endure is not a result of our sin, but instead a result of being a part of a sinful world.

"The wise store up knowledge, but the mouth of the fool invites destruction..."
-Proverbs 10:14

However, even though God is hidden, the earth is still a product of His once *good* creation. This means that it bares His character and follows a certain order that "punishes" us if we fail to adhere to it. The whole purpose of the book of Proverbs is to show us this pattern. To explain to man that if we act in ways that are averse to truth and goodness, we will reap natural consequences. For instance, if I choose to cheat on my wife and she divorces me, is this a result of divine judgment? In one sense it is, because I stepped outside of God's moral order and suffered a natural consequence as a result. But in another sense it isn't God's direct judgment, since it is my wife that is the instrument of judgment, and not God directly striking me with a disease or something.

"But if you do not do so, then take note, you have sinned against the LORD; and be sure your sin will find you out."
-Numbers 32:23

So when we suffer in some way, it isn't wrong for us to look at our behavior and ask if what we are suffering isn't in some part our fault. We must be careful here though, since we have a danger of falling into one of two errors when evaluating suffering like this. Since we live in a fallen world, suffering can actually happen through no fault of your own, and if you assume that all suffering is a result of moral failure, then you will turn into Job's counselors who accuse their friend of sin when he was innocent. On the other hand, since this world does still follow the character of God, to an extent, if our suffering really was our fault, even if it was only partly our fault, if we never see our part in it, we are doomed to suffer repeatedly in the same way.

So for instance, if I am counseling a woman who is in a pattern of engaging with romantic partners who abuse and cheat on her, it is important for me to first console her and help her see that she didn't deserve her mistreatment. But on the other hand, it would be cruel if I never helped her investigate why she was attracting men who were mistreating her. It could be that she suffered past abuse and was subconsciously

seeking out men that would mistreat her, or due to her temperament, she might be presenting herself as easy prey for predatory men. Either way, I do her no favors by consoling her as being a helpless victim with no agency.

This is again something that is lacking in our current culture. We have this strange victim mentality that has permeated our way of thinking. As a result, it is seen as “victim blaming” to even suggest that someone’s misfortune might have something to do with their own behavior. So while the old perspective of assuming that all misfortune was caused by sin resulted in callousness to suffering, and heaping unjust blame on those who were suffering, at least it produced a culture that was conscientious of their behavior and sought to change. This is why the poor and destitute in the past were much more economically mobile than they are today. This was possible because if you believe that misfortune is a result of your own personal failure, then you can believe that changing your behavior can actually improve your circumstances. However, if you believe that your misfortune is only a result of cosmic injustice, then you are only a helpless victim that has no power to change their circumstances.

This is not me advocating the old conception, but instead showing that while it was flawed, it was certainly better than what we are doing now. But we shouldn’t be shooting for the least possible evil, but instead at the good. To balance these two perspectives is incredibly difficult, but if we achieve this healthy synthesis, we can be greatly benefited. We will be able to see our circumstances clearly, and in the circumstances beyond our control, we can suffer well, and grieve appropriately. But when we suffer as a consequence, we can repent and change in the necessary ways to avoid the same problem.

Human Judgment

“Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.”

-Romans 13:2-4

Although God remains the supreme judge of the universe, God’s desire from the beginning has been to share His power and authority with man, so that we might rule over creation and even have structures to govern each other. There seems to be an eternal purpose to this that we don’t fully understand, since in Revelation 21 and 22 when the apostle John receives a vision of heaven, he still sees earthly kings, but God

has done this in our current fallen state because man requires a system of rule over us to act as a mediator between God's divine law and ourselves. If God were to set up a perfect system of law in the here and now, none of us could stand before it. Also, if God would not have empowered the nations of men to judge, then we would have a free for all of individual justice which would become a never-ending series of vengeful acts. And so, God in His mercy has allowed for man to set up governments that can institute laws, and enforce them through political power.

This does not mean, as some have believed, that the laws of man are necessarily good, or that God always condones the actions of the governments, but instead that the ultimate source of human justice is divine. God has created us in His image and therefore, a part of God's perfect law is discernible by man both through God's revelation of Himself through nature, as well as His direct revelation of Himself in Scripture. Here I am going to be heavily paraphrasing Thomas Aquinas in his incredible book "The Summa Theologica". In this book, Thomas Aquinas is attempting to synthesize the sum of all Christian theology and pagan wisdom into one book and in a way that does not compromise, but instead illuminates the gospel. And in one part of his book, he talks about human law.

In this section what he mentions is that God has a divine, perfect law, by which He governs the universe. It is this law that I have been referencing when I speak about the "divine law". This is the law that descends from God's perfect character and therefore can not change or be compromised. This is why we needed the cross. Not to appease any arbitrary human law, but to satisfy the divine law that we have all sinned against. But God has also instituted a natural law. This law helps us to understand the divine law at a distance as we perceive it through the natural consequences of God's created order.

A simple example of the natural law would be the "law" of laziness. If I decide to indulge my slothfulness and stop going to work, exercising, or working on my relationships, I would suffer many natural consequences, namely, I would lose my career, my health, and my relationships. These effects come from the "natural law", but the natural law communicates to me that there must be a divine law that is even higher than nature and that has given birth to these natural laws. What human governments do is they try their best to manifest the natural and divine laws in the form of human laws that they can govern us. They must be careful in doing this though because if they manifest these laws too powerfully they create despair and rebellion, if they manifest it in too weak a fashion, they encourage lawlessness.

For instance, it is a divine and natural law that lying is wrong, but if a nation were to actually penalize lying in all circumstances they would soon find that all citizens would have to be locked up. So in an attempt to create greater peace in the society, they would instead erode it. But, if a nation were to make all forms of lying acceptable, this destroys the basis for contracts, agreements, and lying under oath. The laws that we enact must find a healthy balance and figure out in what instances we should penalize moral infractions.

It is on this basis that a law can be deemed either “just” or “unjust”. When an atheist says that a law is “just”, they either mean that law comes from the individual conscience, in which case they simply mean they like the law. Or they believe that governments create laws, in which case they simply mean that the government has spoken on an issue. For the Christian, because we believe that law descends from God, when we say a law is just we mean it does a good job at manifesting the divine law, and when it is unjust, it corrupts the divine law. This is why God can appropriately judge the nations, and why He can even use certain nations to judge other nations; like Israel judging the Cananites in the book of Joshua, or Babylon judging Israel at the end of 2nd Kings. So it is a good thing that God uses man to judge other men, but this is a sober responsibility for us, not something to be taken lightly. And so whatever power we have over others, whether it is political power, social power in a family, influential power, or even voting power, we are to take this seriously knowing that God has given us this solemn right and that He will judge us based on how we use the power that He has given to us.

“My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.”

-James 3:1

God’s Judgment of the Nations

“He shall judge among the nations, He shall fill the places with dead bodies, He shall execute the heads of many countries.”

-Psalm 110:6

But, passages like Genesis 6 are not speaking of simple natural consequences that God has put into place, or even human judgments, but instead they speak of divine, miraculous judgment of nations. This is one of the main issues that modern day skeptics have towards the Bible. So they will say that God is a genocidal tyrant and point to passages like this, or God’s judgment of the Caananites in the book of Joshua through the Israelite people, or the judgments of the nations in in the Old Testament prophets, or the judgment of the earth in the book of Revelation. This is again something that strikes

modern people as being wrong of God, and yet our pagan ancestors had no problem with this concept.

What you see in the ancient world is that men mainly sought the gods for divine judgment of neighboring nations. They were all under the belief that since their gods were the best, they should judge the other nations in order to bring them under the rule of their “superior” gods. They tended to see imperialistic conquest as the means to do this, and therefore, saw it as a religious act, as well as a political act, to conquer neighboring tribes and peoples. It is in our modern culture that we believe so strongly in national sovereignty and liberty. For this reason, we think it wrong for another power to invade sovereign borders in order to impose a different rule upon the inhabitants, and so we see God in that same light.

The interesting thing about our God as opposed to the pagan gods, is that, even though He has every right to judge the nations on a regular basis, He holds Himself back many times for different purposes. This restraint that God exercises is usually met with frustration by the prophets, with a key example being in the book of Jonah. The reasons that God gives, that really differ from the pagan gods, is first, He only judges nations based on the natural law, and not on specific theological laws, and second, He is very patient with the nations, always hoping for their repentance.

So, when you see God judge the pagan nations in the Old Testament, He does not judge them for not worshiping Him, or adhering to the Old Testament religious codes, instead He judges them based on things that He believes they should know.

“When you come into the land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominations of those nations. “There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, or one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, “or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. “For all who do these things are an abomination to the LORD, and because of these abominations the LORD your God drives them out from before you.”

-Deuteronomy 18:9-12

Notice that God doesn't target the nations based on their ethnicity, but on their behavior. They had given in to horrible pagan practices that included child sacrifice, and for these reasons, God intended to drive them out, and when Israel began practicing the same things, God drove them out as well. This particular passage, about child sacrifice, is one that comes up over and over again when it comes to God's judgment of the nations. Not

only is this a particularly heinous sin, but it also represents an utter failure of a nation to protect its most vulnerable.

When nations begin killing their own children, this is usually a sign of moral degradation so great that justice itself within such nations will certainly falter at every level. And when this happens, like in the times of Noah, as justice fades from a nation, moral pollution tends to reign and expand outward. At this moment, if God does not judge a nation, their suicidal tendencies will overflow their borders and destroy nations around them. So while God is slow to anger, desiring for nations to repent, eventually they will run out of time, and this is when God will send a “flood”.

But, since God is a good judge, His judgment will always be a perfect response to the sin committed. This is why the judgments of God are always different, it is not because God likes variety for its own sake, but instead because God is tailoring His judgment to the sins committed. So for instance, when the Nephilim showed up it was because man was beginning to erode the natural boundaries between the heavens and the earth through intertwining themselves with demons.

So to judge the sin, God eroded the natural boundaries between the heavens and the earth in the form of rain, and the boundaries between the earth and the sea in the form of the flood. Also, the sea in the Bible is a symbol for the chaotic unknown, and so for man to confuse, and mutate their culture in the form of the Nephilim, it is just for God to send the waters of chaos to wash away their corruption. God is never arbitrary in His judgments, for Him, the punishment will always fit the crime. But remember, that there is a difference between a natural consequence and a divine judgment. When God judges directly, He always sends warning first. If not, while God has allowed the judgment, it isn't the same as direct, divine judgment like in the flood..

This knowledge is also important for the reason that Miroslav Volf mentioned. The most heinous atrocities in human history weren't committed by sociopathic individuals, but instead they were carried out through the authority of nations. This is why when we think of things like the Holocaust, we don't tend to think about individual soldiers but “the Nazi's”. We understand that it wasn't really the individual soldiers who created the gas chambers, but a severely corrupted society run by evil men. It was within this society that the soldiers became active participants with the corruption. And so, if I am going to be able to love my enemies, it is actually very important that I really believe that God is going to judge, not just the individuals, but even the nations.

God's Judgment of Individuals

"The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself."

-Ezekiel 18:20

Social Justice

Even though God does judge societies at large, He also judges individuals on the basis of their actions. Before we talk more about what this kind of judgment looks like, we have to talk about a specific way that our culture has gotten this concept very wrong through "social justice". Like all the other modern mistakes that our culture makes about justice, this one is also a pollution of the gospel. In the gospel accounts, you have a poor preacher who is opposed by the power structures of His culture and is eventually executed by them. For the majority of church history, this narrative was a condemnation of the pagan idea that those with power were necessarily those who were blessed by the gods, and the ones without it were cursed by the gods. It opened people's eyes to the fact that power structures can be unjust and therefore, Christians ought to help the less fortunate.

However, this idea was matched with another idea from the Bible that we have discussed earlier, that man is inherently fallen. Because of our fallenness, we understand the truth of what Jesus says in Mark 14:7:

"For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good..."

This was an incredibly important saying of Jesus for the apostles. Many Jews had believed, due to many old testament prophecies like Isaiah 9, that at the Messiah would come as a conquering king and at His coming, the world would be brought under the authority of the Messiah and there would be universal peace and prosperity. They couldn't have understood that these passages reference the second coming of the Messiah, not the first coming where He came, not as a conquering king, but as our great high priest in order to atone for our sins. So when Jesus says "you have the poor with you always..." He is telling them that His coming won't actually produce the universal prosperity that they had hoped for.

Instead we understand that the issues that cause poverty and oppression are not because of the "wrong" system of governance, or a failure of compassion from the faithful, but instead an intrinsic problem with the state of this fallen world due to the

fallen nature of man. When Christians began to forget this in the late Renaissance period in Europe, they started to believe in Utopian ideals of socialism. They thought that man isn't inherently bad, but instead we are inherently good and it is only through the oppression of the state that we become bad. They therefore concluded that if they instituted the right governmental systems, man would be perfect once again. One of these people was Beatrice Webb, who many view as the architect of the social welfare system that exists in England to this day. But towards the end of her life she wrote this in her diary:

“Somewhere in my diary – 1890? – I wrote “I have staked all on the essential goodness of human nature...” [Now thirty-five years later I realize] how permanent are the evil impulses and instincts of man – how little you can count on changing some of these – for instance the appeal of wealth and power – by any change in the [social] machinery.... No amount of knowledge or science will be of any avail unless we can curb the bad impulse.”

The problem with our systems isn't that there is a perfect one out there that will actually fix everything, but instead we need to understand that governments are a little like clothing after the fall. Before the fall, man needed no clothes because God was their covering, but after the fall, we need clothing for both practical and moral reasons. The same is true of the government. When God was our true sovereign, intermediary human institutions would have been superfluous, but after the fall, we need them. However, like everything else in this world they are innately flawed. So, while governments at their best can and do speak of our true king in heaven, they are imperfect and always will be since they are instituted by fallen men, over fallen men. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't fight for better systems, but not with these naive, Utopian sentiments based on the false belief that humans are essentially good.

Modern culture is falling into this same trap. Many of the modern political left, whether knowingly or not, are influenced by the thoughts of the European enlightenment thinkers, and Karl Marx. Because of this, they really do believe that people who commit crimes are only doing this because they are victims of some sort of oppression, so we must reshape the system in accordance with “social justice” in order to atone for the past and produce a perfect future.

While there are many out there proclaiming this false belief, one of the most pronounced is Ibram X. Kendi:

“The only remedy to racist discrimination is antiracist discrimination. The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination.”

-Ibram X. Kendi: How to be An Antiracist

What Kendi, and those like them, believe is that discrimination is created by bad governmental systems. But, since they don't actually believe in the innate fallen nature of man, they aren't worried at all of instituting a new regime with unchecked power in order to right past injustices with present discrimination. What they are missing, is that if they too are fallen, whatever system they erect will be just as unjust and fallen as the one they are seeking to supplant. It will actually be even worse, because the American structure of governance is one of the few on this earth that has taken into account the fallen nature of man, and therefore has sought to diffuse power so that the government won't become overly tyrannical through their power. But modern man has forgotten this and is seeking total governmental control once again, thinking that if we could just get power in the right hands, everything would be perfect. Once again, this doesn't mean that systems of government can't make things better, or worse, just that they can't be perfect. Since we have seen this go wrong so many times in the past couple hundred years, it is only ignorance of the past that could explain our inability to recognize the pattern of destruction that we are placing ourselves within.

In the French Revolution, the first of these revolutions for utopia to go wrong, this is exactly what happened. They started out fighting for justice and equity, and ended up with a terrible campaign of tyranny that was even worse than the monarchy that they overthrew. The man who took over after the revolution, only to be killed by that same revolution later, was Maximilien Robespierre. After he had seized power, he tried to justify his own tyranny in a speech entitled “Virtue and Terror” in 1794, here is a quote from that speech:

“It has been said that terror was the mainspring of despotic government. Does your government, then, resemble a despotism? Yes, as the sword which glitters in the hands of Liberty's heroes resembles the one with which tyranny's lackeys are armed... The government of the revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny... Social protection is due only to peaceful citizens; there are no citizens in the Republic but the republicans.”

-Maximilien Robespierre - "Virtue & Terror"

He actually boasts of his tyranny here and claims that he has every right to act in this way to somehow use tyranny to destroy tyranny. Just as modern social justice acolytes are trying to use discrimination, racism, and oppression to somehow wipe out

discrimination, racism, and oppression. Although, with ideas like “liberation theology” and the “social gospel” the root of these ideas have infected many Christian organizations, there have been pastors and leaders who have found ways to balance these utopian ideals with the reality of the true gospel. The most famous example of this would be Martin Luther King Jr. There are many times when he addressed this issue, but it was always a fear of his that his movement would be taken over by radical revolutionaries. People who would try to set up Utopia through death and terror, and he was so careful to instruct people away from this. Showing them the better way through Christ, and helping them see that he wasn’t seeking a revolution, but a reformation. He didn’t seek destroying what came before, but instead, reforming it so that the system he lived in actually fulfilled its promises, in the best ways possible in the here and now. Here is an excerpt from his famous “I have a Dream Speech” that illustrates this really well:

“But there is something that I must say to my people, who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice: In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence... No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until “justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream...” I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...” I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

-Martin Luther King Jr- I Have a Dream

Because the reverend King believed in the supreme justice of God, he was able to rest in that truth and judge people as individuals. He didn’t labor under the bitterness of past discrimination, but instead genuinely believed that God would judge on his behalf. But, because he believed in his own fallenness, he knew that he could be corrupted by hatred just as easily as anyone else. This is why he quotes from the prophet Amos when he says “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.” He understood that true justice and righteousness comes from God alone, not from the wrath of man. If we want to avoid the mistakes of this modern movement, as well as the hatred of it, we have to be grounded in the truth of God’s justice like he was.

Individual Justice

With that being said, let’s now focus on how God truly judges individuals. Now, much of the judgment that we will receive in the here and now is simply natural consequences

for our bad decisions, or simply falling prey to the natural decay of this earth. Even so, these two things are experienced very differently for the believer and the non-believer.

“My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives.” If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?”

-Hebrews 12:5-7

For the believer, when natural consequences come upon us, we know that this isn't arbitrary, but a result of sinning against the morality and wisdom of the God of all creation. Because of this, while we will be hurt by these consequences, we won't be crushed because we know that these consequences are not a result of God being wrathful towards us. Instead, we see these as the discipline of our loving Father who wants us to learn from our mistakes, repent, and seek greater holiness and wisdom in Him. And when our suffering is due to the fallen nature of this world, we remember that our Lord and Savior was also subject to pain and death. Through this understanding, we know that even the worst, and most unjust suffering we may endure, while terrible, is also with purpose and intent from the same God that formed our salvation out of the suffering of His only Son.

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

-2 Corinthians 4:16-18

But for the non-believer, they don't have this comfort. The natural consequences that they suffer are not signs of discipline from their loving Father in heaven, but instead a foretaste of the final judgment that they will incur when they see Him face to face. While they can learn from their consequences like the believer, if they never see these consequences as a need for salvation for their souls, all they will achieve is a slightly better life in the here and now, followed by an eternity of separation from God. And when they suffer from the natural evils of this world, this won't be preparing them for any unique glory in heaven, but instead just be meaningless suffering that will ultimately end in their death and punishment.

Which leads to another unpopular teaching of Christianity, God's final judgment of the unrepentant.

“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”

-Matthew 10:28

Once again, this is a view that has only recently become unpopular in our present day. For all of human history, and in every human religion, people have understood that God, or the gods, have the divine right to punish the wicked, even for all eternity. But in our modern culture, we focus so much on the redemption of the wicked that we think that the only just purpose of punishment is to produce reform. But this isn't true, as stated before, the prime purpose of punishment is retribution, to cause someone to pay for their crime. If someone repents as a result of their punishment, great, but that isn't the main reason why we punish the guilty.

We need to understand that since God is perfectly good, His justice is perfect, and infinite. Because of this, there is no sin that God could ever overlook, no matter how small. God can not lower His standards of righteousness to appease us, if He is perfect, He must judge perfectly. This means that no one who is imperfect may stand in His presence. This is the whole point of the gospel. Since God could not dismiss any of our sins, He had to judge them. But if God judged us for what we did, none of us would be able to stand before Him. And so, He had His Son come in the flesh to live the life that we could never live, and die the death that we all deserved. Through this sacrifice, we may have forgiveness of sin and unity with the Father.

“But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

-Romans 3:21-26

This is the wonderful thing about God, but because He is not only just but loving, it is a forgiveness that He will not force on anyone. We can reject this offering and seek to justify ourselves in our own strength. But when we do this, if we reject the infinite love and sacrifice of God, what could be a more worthy punishment than to be eternally separate from the One who has offered us this? This is what hell is. It is a place of infinite separation from God. But since God is the center of every good and perfect

thing, to be separated from Him would be, by definition, hell. I believe C.S. Lewis put it best in his book "The Problem of Pain":

"In the long run the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell, is itself a question: 'What are you asking God to do?' to wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does."

-C.S. Lewis - The Problem of Pain

If God was willing to lay down the life of His only Son in order to save us, we can conclude that there is no distance that God is unwilling to go to save us, except take away our free will. It is a mistake to believe that the residents of hell are repentant, they are suffering, but they also don't want to be forgiven. I am sure, like the rich man in Luke 17, they regret where they are and want the suffering to stop, but, also like the rich man, they aren't willing to humble themselves and repent for what they have done. I am sure they are willing to lay blame on others' feet, but to truly ask for forgiveness from God, to actually seek to submit themselves, body and soul to Him, this is what the damned reject. As Satan says in Paradise Lost: "Here we may reign secure, and in my choice to reign is worth ambition though in Hell: better to reign in Hell, then serve in Heaven." This is the choice that faces everyone on this earth. Will we submit to the judge of the earth and receive forgiveness, or will we be judged by Him for our sins?

"I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live;"

-Deuteronomy 30:19