

Redemptive
Reversals and the
Ironic Overturning
of Human Wisdom

G. K. Beale

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Redemptive Reversals and the Ironic Overturning of Human Wisdom

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*To Lynn, Frank, and Helen Garrott,
pilgrims who have walked the ironic cruciform path of our Lord*

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Foreword

A Most Unlikely Revival

I have asked my longtime friend Andrew White to write a foreword. Andrew is a medical doctor and former student of mine from when I taught at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He is an excellent doctor and perceptive theologian. The true story he tells here exemplifies many of the ideas in this book.

My story is thirty-seven years old, yet every time I tell it (which is often), my listeners encourage me to tell it to more people, using mass media. Greg Beale and his wife, Dorinda, have been the most persistent and persuasive listeners. So I am finally putting to pen a personal, historical account of a spiritual revival in 1980 among the Khmer Rouge in a refugee camp at the Thailand/Cambodian border called Sa Kaeo. This story is amazing because a revival was so unlikely for two reasons: (1) The Khmer Rouge (many of whom were converted in the revival) had been vicious murderers in the Cambodian genocide of the 1970s. That genocide had a greater percentage

of the population killed than in any other genocide in the history of the world. (2) Those who spearheaded the revival were the most unlikely people at best—a murderer, an over-the-hill missionary, and a severely depressed doctor. In spite of these two serious problems, a wonderful revival was clearly authored by God, and it brought him great glory.

In order to set the stage for this true story, I must give you a brief history of Cambodia from 1975 to 1979 (the period of time detailed in the award-winning movie *The Killing Fields*). My main source for this history is from the website *Cambodian Tribunal Monitor*.¹ The Khmer (Cambodian) Rouge (Red), otherwise known as the Communist Party of Kampuchea, ruled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. The Khmer Rouge leader, Pol Pot, took control of Cambodia in 1975 in the wake of a civil war that ousted Prince Sihanouk. Pol Pot wanted to transform Cambodia into a rural, classless society not unlike communist China. People were not allowed to leave their rural cooperatives, and if three or more people gathered together in unapproved conversation, they risked being charged as enemies of the state and executed. Others worked twelve hours a day, and many died from inadequate rest, starvation, and lack of medical services. Cambodian soldiers, military officers, and civil servants under Prince Sihanouk, as well as intellectuals, city residents, and minority groups, were detained, interrogated, imprisoned, tortured, and executed.

Many who escaped execution were members of Prince Sihanouk's Free Khmer, who fought against the Khmer Rouge. For the most part, the Free Khmer were overpowered by the Khmer Rouge. Many of the Free Khmer fled into neighboring Thailand. When the Vietnamese fought their way into Cambodia to conquer it in 1979, the Khmer Rouge had killed nearly two million of its own people. In

1. <http://www.cambodiatribunal.org/history/cambodian-history/khmer-rouge-history/>.

the wake of the Vietnamese offensive, the Khmer Rouge, like the Free Khmer, fled into neighboring Thailand. For obvious reasons, the Khmer Rouge and Free Khmer were housed in different refugee camps. One of the Khmer Rouge refugee camps at the Thailand/Cambodia border was Sa Kaoe, where I served as the attending physician on a malaria ward for just two weeks in the spring of 1980. But I am getting ahead of my story.

I was a resident physician in family medicine in Charleston, South Carolina, from 1978 to 1981. My wife and I heard of the genocide in Cambodia at a church service in the winter of 1979, and on our way home from that service, I told my wife that I would really like to help the Free Khmer refugees. That was not possible, however, because I could not be released from my duties as a second-year family medicine resident. My wife and I decided that at least we could pray for the refugees.

When I went to the residency center the following day, I found a remarkable memo in my mailbox. The memo, from the dean of the medical university of South Carolina, said that in response to the refugee crisis in Cambodia, resident physicians could be released from their duties to serve in Cambodia and that the service would be credited to their diplomas. Additionally, all service provided would be financed by the Southern Baptist Church. I immediately called my wife and told her that I had received a handwritten message from God. I could hardly tell God no to what couldn't have been a clearer calling. Even though we had a six-month-old son, my wife fully supported my decision to help in this potentially dangerous mission.

In preparation for our departure to Cambodia, a group of Charleston resident physicians and faculty from many different medical disciplines met together regularly to plan our mission and create a strong support group. By the spring of 1980 we had bonded and were ready to fly to Thailand. However, when I stepped off the

plane in Thailand, I had a panic attack, which rapidly precipitated a severe depression. I have had a history of severe depressions since the age of ten (seven depressions in all, with the seventh lasting thirteen years). I experience depression as terror, searing mental pain, poor concentration, inaccessible memory, mental exhaustion, a seeming inability to do even the smallest tasks, and a longing for death. Needless to say I could not understand why God allowed me to become so depressed when I had been so excited about my six-week mission to the Cambodians in Thailand.

I was initially assigned to a mission hospital in Thailand, for two weeks, to be initiated into the Thailand culture and local medical practice. Fortunately I found some imipramine (an antidepressant) in the mission pharmacy. Unfortunately it takes four to six weeks for the antidepressant to take effect. So despite the medicine, I remained severely depressed. After two weeks I was transferred back to my mission team at a camp for the Free Khmer. When I arrived at the Free Khmer refugee camp, I found that there were too many physicians for the number of refugees, and I was left with nothing to do. With this new reality, I became even more depressed since I couldn't understand why God had sent me to Thailand if there was no need for my medical services. After two weeks of doing almost nothing except drowning in my depression, our mission group received a memo from Sa Kaeo, a Khmer Rouge refugee camp in northeastern Thailand. The memo said Sa Kaeo was in need of a physician for a malaria ward, since the attending physician had become ill and had to return to the United States. No one in our mission team wanted the assignment because we were such a cohesive group. I, however, experienced a remarkably clear sense from God that I needed to accept the assignment. I knew that from a mental health perspective, leaving my support group was the worst possible choice, but somehow I knew that God would take care of me. I also knew that

God would help me get over my well-founded prejudice against the murderous Khmer Rouge.

When I arrived at the Khmer Rouge refugee camp in Sa Kaeo, I was assigned to a malaria ward. Upon being admitted to the medical ward, most patients were too ill to talk to, apart from their medical history. By the second day, however, most were more attentive. God had impressed upon me that I needed to share the gospel with every patient through an interpreter. I was, however, so depressed that the only thing I could communicate was to ask all the patients whether there was sin in their lives. The response was uniformly yes. Given the recent history of the Khmer Rouge, it is not surprising that so many would recognize their sin. Still, I was amazed at the honesty of 100 percent of my patients, and I then told them that I would bring good news about their sin the next day.

As I made ward rounds the following day, many of the patients had big smiles on their faces. They told me they had not been able to wait to hear the good news from me and so had sought out the ward chaplain. The chaplain was a retired Cambodian Methodist missionary. He had had only a small harvest of faithful believers while he was in Cambodia, but he could speak Cambodian fluently and had translated the biblical book of John into Khmer (Cambodian). The missionary chaplain lacked a charismatic personality, but he clearly loved Jesus and was a channel of the Holy Spirit.

There was only one Khmer Rouge patient on my ward who could read. In Cambodia he had been a vicious leader. Somehow, he had escaped death—the majority of those who could read had been killed because they were considered intellectuals. He was very ill, suffering with the most fatal form of malaria, complicated by bacterial pneumonia. His chest X-ray hung over his bed on a clothesline for easy viewing. During the day when this patient felt stronger (a strength I felt was miraculous, given the severity of his illnesses), he stood up

on his cot and read aloud in a strong voice from the beginning to the end of John, over and over again. Periodically he would point to the abnormality on his chest X-ray and tell his fellow patients that God was healing him of the pneumonia. While he read, the Holy Spirit was a palpable reality throughout the ward.

When I made rounds the second day, I very briefly shared the good news to those who were not smiling. I simply told them that Jesus Christ had died for their sins, and if they trusted him, they would be completely forgiven. A full half of them accepted Jesus as Savior and Lord. The missionary chaplain had to explain to them in more detail the meaning and necessity of salvation. I was too depressed to do that. Two of my patients died but not before they favorably received the good news of Jesus, the forgiver of their sin and the joy of their salvation.

Also remarkable was that God was rapidly raising up a Khmer Rouge evangelist who had been discipled by our missionary chaplain. He had been a Christian for only three weeks. The evangelist was no Billy Graham, but daily he went to the scores of new house churches in the camp (which were really just shacks). There he evangelized and discipled the Cambodians all day at great risk of martyrdom at the hand of the unconverted Khmer Rouge leaders. Those who were part of the house churches were also at great risk. The Khmer Rouge leaders told the people that if they converted to Christianity, they would have to “lay on the ground” when they returned to Cambodia, a euphemism for digging your own grave. At the end of each day the evangelist was exhausted but was unable to sleep and was visibly trembling from anxiety. Each night I would give him a shot of Valium (a tranquilizer and sleep medicine). Each morning he woke up refreshed and continued his vigorous ministry.

I was only at Sa Kaeo for two weeks but participated in a spiritual revival that ultimately led to the salvation of several thousand Khmer

Rouge refugees. I heard some time after I left Sa Kaeo that the new Christian refugees asked the Thailand government to allow them to build a Christian church. Thailand is predominantly Buddhist, so the government told the Christian refugees that they could not build a church until there was a Buddhist temple. Seeking the Lord's guidance, the Christian Khmer Rouge first built a Buddhist temple, which was hardly used, and then a large, thriving Christian church.

As I began this story I recounted the two reasons a revival was so unlikely at Sa Kaeo. First, the converts were among the vilest and most hardened sinners the world has ever known (every bit as evil as the Nazi SS). Second, the leaders of the revival were the least suitable people for participation in a revival. The four leaders of the revival whom God had raised up were (1) a severely depressed doctor (me) of a busy malarial ward who was mentally capable only of sharing the most elementary gospel message; (2) a retired missionary minister who had seen little fruit while serving in Cambodia but knew Cambodian and had translated John; (3) an exhausted, anxious, brand-new Khmer Rouge evangelist; and (4) a rare Khmer Rouge patient who could read and was sick with the most fatal form of malaria, complicated by pneumonia. Nevertheless, he read the Gospel of John over and over again.

These four weak vessels were used by the Lord in an astounding way. During the time I was in Thailand, I had no joy despite the many conversions I witnessed, because I was so depressed. But now I am full of great joy thinking about the way the Lord used weak vessels, including me, in order to maximize his glory. Jesus clearly led this great revival, leaving no doubt that the Holy Spirit was responsible for it.

I continue to have recurrent severe depressions, so I look forward to the day when my feeble mind is completely renewed in the eternal new creation. Even during my deepest depressions, however, I can

take some comfort in the way God used me in a Khmer Rouge revival in a refugee camp at the Thailand/Cambodian border in 1980. Over the years I have come to trust God increasingly. If God could use me when I was so severely depressed, how could I not trust him with all other things? God always brings glory to himself, and being a weak vessel is no obstacle to the accomplishment of his will—his good and perfect will.

My life is a testimony that God uses weakness to produce strength and thus accomplish his gracious rule. Indeed, Jesus said to the apostle Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore [Paul says] I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses . . . with distresses . . . with calamities, for when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Cor. 12:9–10). This is the irony of Christian living, upon which this book by my friend and former teacher, Greg Beale, will elaborate.

Andrew A. White, MD, MATS, 2017

Series Preface

Most of us tend to approach the Bible early on in our Christian lives as a vast, cavernous, and largely impenetrable book. We read the text piecemeal, finding golden nuggets of inspiration here and there, but remain unable to plug any given text meaningfully into the overarching storyline. Yet one of the great advances in evangelical biblical scholarship over the past few generations has been the recovery of biblical theology—that is, a renewed appreciation for the Bible as a theologically unified, historically rooted, progressively unfolding, and ultimately Christ-centered narrative of God’s covenantal work in our world to redeem sinful humanity.

This renaissance of biblical theology is a blessing, yet little of it has been made available to the general Christian population. The purpose of Short Studies in Biblical Theology is to connect the resurgence of biblical theology at the academic level with everyday believers. Each volume is written by a capable scholar or churchman who is consciously writing in a way that requires no prerequisite theological training of the reader. Instead, any thoughtful Christian disciple can track with and benefit from these books.

Each volume in this series takes a whole-Bible theme and traces it through Scripture. In this way readers not only learn about a

given theme but also are given a model for how to read the Bible as a coherent whole.

We have launched this series because we love the Bible, we love the church, and we long for the renewal of biblical theology in the academy to enliven the hearts and minds of Christ's disciples all around the world. As editors, we have found few discoveries more thrilling in life than that of seeing the whole Bible as a unified story of God's gracious acts of redemption, and indeed of seeing the whole Bible as ultimately about Jesus, as he himself testified (Luke 24:27; John 5:39).

The ultimate goal of *Short Studies in Biblical Theology* is to magnify the Savior and to build up his church—magnifying the Savior through showing how the whole Bible points to him and his gracious rescue of helpless sinners; and building up the church by strengthening believers in their grasp of these life-giving truths.

Dane C. Ortlund and Miles V. Van Pelt

Introduction

Our life consists of ups and downs. We are usually surprised by both, but we should not be so surprised, since the Bible testifies that such ups and downs are part of the divinely designed warp and woof of life. This is true of both the believer in Christ and the unbeliever. But what may appear for the unbeliever as a positive upturn in life is sometimes really, from God's view and plan, the beginning of a downturn in judgment. And what appears to be a downturn in the believer's life is really an upturn in blessing.

These ups and downs involve ironic patterns. What is *irony*? Irony is the saying of something or the doing of something that implies its opposite. What is said or done really indicates the reverse of the saying or act. This book is about the notion that God deals with humans in primarily ironic ways. The Bible is a record of how God has so dealt with humans. There are two kinds of biblical or theological irony. There is *retributive irony* whereby God punishes people by the very means of their own sin. We will see this in chapters 1 and 2. There is also *redemptive irony* whereby the faithful appear to be cursed, but as they persevere in faith, they are really in the midst of being blessed.¹ We will see this in chapters 3 to 6. Both kinds of

1. Warren Austin Gage first formulated these two kinds of theological irony in a personal conversation, which has helped me to clarify better these kinds of ironies in the Bible.

theological ironies are true of humans in general. Everyone is ultimately caught in the matrix of one of these two ironic patterns of living. Christians need to be aware of the ironic nature of life in order that they not become discouraged at bad events in their lives. In fact, we will see that the ironic nature of Christian living is necessary in order that faith be given opportunity to grow.

This book explains how Scripture depicts these two kinds of irony in the lives of people. And how these two ironies reach their zenith points in Satan (through retributive irony) and in Christ (through redemptive irony). As you read this book, you will perceive more of the nature of what irony is. Before I can discuss irony in the Scriptures, however, I must talk briefly about the various kinds of literary ironies.²

At its core, “irony is saying one thing and meaning another.”³ All ironies are composed of three basic elements: (1) two or more layers or levels of meaning (one to the observer and one to the victim). (2) One layer has an opposite meaning to that of the other layer (respectively, what is apparent is the opposite of what is reality). (3) Either the observer or the victim is unaware of this tension or surprised by it.⁴ Generally, three kinds of ironies have traditionally been recognized in literary studies. There is *verbal irony*, which is saying one thing and meaning its opposite. Here a verbal statement is aimed at a particular person. Second, there is *dramatic irony* or an irony of narrated events, wherein narrated events are turned to the opposite of the way that they appeared to be heading. Finally, there is *character irony*, part of dramatic irony, whereby one’s true character stands in contrast with what he appears to be.⁵

2. I am grateful to my research assistant, Tyler Milliken, for his research into literary irony, of which the brief remainder of this chapter is a summary.

3. Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark’s Gospel: Text and Subtext* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 60, citing Cicero.

4. Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark’s Gospel*, 61, citing D. C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, 1st ed. (London: Methuen Young, 1969), 19–20.

5. See InHee C. Berg, *Irony in the Matthean Passion Narrative* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 79–80, 88, 95, for discussion of these three ironies.

Luke's narrative of the rejection of the gospel by the Jews is saturated with irony. In particular, Luke's narration of the rejection of Jesus is mirrored by the depiction in Acts, where every effort to stand against God's plan only fulfills it in every prophetic detail (e.g., see Acts 2:23 and 13:27). In Luke, the rejection of Jesus by the Jews is the catalyst for his redeeming death, whereas in Acts the persecution of the church becomes the catalyst for saving evangelism. Luke also develops the principle that "some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last" (Luke 13:30). These programmatic ironies run throughout Luke-Acts.⁶ Thus, some of the highest forms of biblical irony are where there is narrated an "unexpected reversal of fate and fortune," which is "the jolting turn of events" wherein "the mighty are brought low and humble exalted."⁷

In John 19 the Roman soldiers mock the bleeding Jesus by saying their "Hail to the King!" The soldiers do not believe that Jesus is any kind of king, and they intend their sarcastic words to be a direct attack on Jesus, whom they believe is an imposter. A reader perceives that the "lower" level of the mocking is false, whereas the irony becomes apparent at the "higher" level, where it is evident that the soldiers are the real victims of their own mocking, since they are crucifying the one who is, in fact, the true divine king of the universe.⁸ Another example of this kind of irony is Paul's claim in 2 Corinthians 12:10: "When I am weak, then I am strong."⁹

So now we turn to the substance of the book.

6. E.g., see Jerry L. Ray, *Narrative Irony in Luke-Acts* (Lewiston: NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), 109–11. For brief definition of dialectical irony (or programmatic irony), see p. 38; on Acts 2:23, see pp. 109–10; on the negative consequences of Jewish rejection and positive Gentile consequences in Acts 13:27–52, see pp. 110–11.

7. Paul Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 11.

8. Cf. similarly on John 19:1–3 in Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 132.

9. Karl A. Plank, *Paul and the Irony of Affliction* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 21n13.

God Judges People by Their Own Sin

[The Nazi War criminal Josef] Mengele did not entirely escape punishment. . . . The aging fugitive . . . “lived apprehensive and afraid, fearful of being found by Jews.” . . . He suffered migraine headaches and slept with a Mauser pistol by his bed. . . . Though there was never a punishment that would fit the dimensions of Mengele’s crimes, is it not peculiarly appropriate that he was condemned to a lifetime of fearing his own victims, and that his punishment should be inflicted by himself?

—Otto Fredrick, *Time*, June 24, 1985

One of my favorite pastimes in graduate school, after completing a big paper or final exam, was to go to the local ice cream shop and reward myself with a huge bowl of chocolate mint ice cream. This was the height of culinary delight. In reality, I found many excuses to reward

myself with such treats. A few years later when I went to my doctor for a physical, he informed me that were I to continue over the years with this ice cream binge, my health would be seriously affected. I realized that the very thing in which I was finding great pleasure could at the same time be causing me, quite literally, “heartache” in the long run. But perhaps my biggest mistake was telling my wife what the doctor had said. I should have known that forever afterward, she would remind me of this sober truth. I have never been able to enjoy my huge bowls of chocolate mint ice cream since. Most of us are familiar with this kind of omnivorous irony. There are so many delicacies that do our taste buds good but simultaneously “do in” our bodies.

On a more serious note, punitive ironies transcend culinary bounds. There are many things people do purely for pleasure or self-interest even though they know it may hurt them in the long run.

A former student of mine, while taking a final exam on the subject of biblical ethics, tried to get a good grade by cheating. During the exam she approached me at the front of the room in order to get clarification about one of the questions. As she pointed her finger to the question on the exam paper, I saw answers written on her hand. The very way she attempted to succeed—through cheating—was the very way in which she failed.

From the political realm, many can probably recall the Machiavellian irony involving former President Richard Nixon. He attempted unjustly to become one of the most famous presidents in American history. He hoped to ensure his success by having all his conversations in the oval office recorded. Indeed, Nixon became our most infamous president because these very tapes exposed his underhanded attempts to defeat his political opponents.

These illustrations reflect an ironic moral principle, that when a person unethically schemes to succeed, often the scheme is discovered by the potential victims before it can be accomplished. The very

way by which people attempt sinfully to get ahead often becomes the very means by which they fail.

This principle is at work in every level of life. An article in *Time* magazine some years ago made this observation about drugs: "People addicted to cocaine are out of control. . . . So it is a mean, symmetrical irony that cocaine's effect is to mimic will and emotional focus, permitting the user to feel he is blessed with precisely the virtues he lacks."¹ I know a woman who drank excessively so that she would feel less inhibited when she socialized. This appeared to work for awhile until she had to quit drinking permanently because of a liver ailment. In her later years, because of the deadening effects of alcohol, she had no personality but sat and stared blankly in the midst of social gatherings. The very things in which people wrongly attempt to find liberation frequently become the things that bring them into harsher bondage.

This ironic principle of judgment is expressed well in the proverb, "There is a way which seems right to man, but its end is the way of death" (Prov. 16:25). When we set out to succeed at something in an unethical manner, circumstances often have an uncanny way of reversing so that we are forced to fail.

In the light of what we have said so far, we can define irony generally as the doing or saying of something that implies its opposite. What is done or said is really the reverse of what at first appears to be the case. God frequently deals with humanity in an ironic way. This is true in his acts of judgment and salvation, so that irony is one of the major thematic threads tying together the whole of Scripture. God repeatedly drives the events of history in the reverse direction from which they first appear to be moving. We look first at how God carries out his work of ironic punishment.

1. Kurt Andersen, "Crashing on Cocaine," *Time* (April 11, 1983), 25.

It's a Turn-Around World

There was once a Persian prince named Haman and a Jew of low status called Mordecai. Mordecai had saved the king of Persia by revealing a plot to kill the king, although the king was unaware that it was Mordecai who had made the plot known. Haman hated Mordecai because he would not bow down and pay homage to him as vice president of Persia (Est. 3:1–5). As a result, Haman vented his childish anger by persuading King Ahasuerus to decree that all Jews in the empire be annihilated (Est. 3:6–15), and he plotted to have Mordecai hanged on the gallows (Est. 5:14).

As providence would have it, the night before Mordecai was to be hanged, the king could not sleep, so he ordered his servants to read to him for pleasure's sake the recent records of the affairs of the kingdom. In these records the king read that it was Mordecai who had revealed the assassination plot against him. Upon discovering that Mordecai had not been honored for this, he desired to make things right. Now at this very time Haman happened to be entering the king's court to request permission to hang Mordecai. Before Haman had the opportunity to discuss Mordecai, the king asked him, "What is to be done for the man whom the king desires to honor?" (Est. 6:6). Haman, thinking the king was referring to him, answered,

For the man whom the king desires to honor, let them bring a royal robe which the king has worn, and the horse on which the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown has been placed; and let the robe and the horse be handed over to one of the king's noble princes and let them array the man whom the king desires to honor and lead him on horseback through the city square, and proclaim before him, "Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king desires to honor. (Est. 6:7–9)

Haman was shocked and humiliated when the king commanded him to “do so for Mordecai the Jew” (Est. 6:10), especially since Haman was required to lead Mordecai’s horse through the city square. This was certainly an unexpected turn of events, but it was only the beginning of an even greater ironic reversal.

After the king had authorized Haman’s plot (Est. 3:8–11), Queen Esther, Mordecai’s step-daughter, informed the king about Haman’s plot to exterminate all the Jews (which included Esther) and to hang Mordecai. The king angrily declared that Haman should be hanged on the very gallows upon which he had planned to hang Mordecai (Esther 7), and he made it possible for the Jews throughout his land to destroy Haman’s allies who were planning to exterminate them (Esther 8–9). Therefore, “when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, it was turned to the contrary so that the Jews themselves gained the mastery” (Est. 9:1), and “it was a month which was turned for them from sorrow into gladness” (Est. 9:22). The Lord had designed that Haman’s wicked scheme “which he had devised . . . should return on his own head” (Est. 9:25). That the name “Haman” in Hebrew may mean “celebrated one” is likely not coincidence. He tried to win a victory over the Jews and celebrate, but he was the one defeated and celebrated over by his enemies (Est. 9:17–22, 27). In fact, this victory has been celebrated by the Jews as the festival of Purim for centuries ever since.

Surely the story of Mordecai’s rise and Haman’s demise exemplifies a more general principle whereby God “sets on high those who are lowly, and those who mourn are lifted to safety,” but “He frustrates the plotting of the shrewd, so that their hands cannot attain success” (Job 5:11–12), for “his own scheme brings him down. . . . And . . . a noose for him is hidden in the ground” (Job 18:7–10).

An Eye for an Eye

This story from the book of Esther is illustrative of the same idea found repeatedly in the Old Testament, where God punishes sinners by means of their own sin. The principle of ironic justice is lucidly summarized in Leviticus 24:19–31:

If a man injures his neighbor, just as he has done, so shall it be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye . . . just as he has injured a man, so it shall be inflicted on him. (cf. Ex. 21:23–25)

The idea is that the form of a man's punishment is to be patterned after the form of his crime or sin.² So, for example, the very act of killing another shows the pattern of how the killer must be punished—he must also be killed. Hence, killing may seem the right way to act for a man, but its end is the way of death. Furthermore, the murderer will be punished by means of his own sin.

That this is not an atypical form of divine punishment is born out by the Psalms:

Hold them guilty, O God;
by their own devices let them fall. (Ps. 5:10)

[The wicked man] has dug a pit and hollowed it out,
And he has fallen into the hole which he made.
His mischief will return upon his own head. (Ps. 7:15–16)

Speaking of the judgment of evil nations, David says: “In the net which they hid, their own foot has been caught. The LORD

2. Exodus 21:23–25 is known as the *lex talionis* (law of retaliation) in which the punishment resembles the crime committed. Strictly speaking, this principle is literally true *primarily* in the case of murder. Otherwise Exodus 21 becomes a figurative expression to denote that the gravity of punishment must be equal to the gravity of the crime. But we shall see that the literal understanding is observable throughout the Old Testament.

has . . . executed judgment, in the work of his own hands the wicked is snared” (Ps. 9:15–16). Perhaps reflecting on the times when Saul was hunting David with the sword, David asserts, “The wicked have drawn the sword . . . to slay those who are upright in conduct. Their sword will enter their own heart” (Ps. 37:14–15; cf. 1 Sam. 31:4). In light of this, the verdict of ironic justice upon Saul was predictable, as he took his life by falling on his own sword (1 Sam. 31:4). Likewise, David’s son Solomon states, “He who rolls a stone, it will come back on him” (Prov. 26:27). Indeed, “there is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Prov. 14:12; 16:25). In the Old Testament this ironic principle of justice was most observed by the “wise man” who discerned its repeated occurrence in the lives of others (see Job 18:8; Pss. 35:8; 57:6; 64:3–8; 75:4–5,10; 115:2–8; Prov. 1:18–19, 31; 14:32; 21:7,13; 22:16; 26:27; 28:10, 22).

You Shall Reap What You Sow

Is it a coincidence that most of the statements of ironic judgment are found in the wisdom writings of the psalmist of Israel, David? It is likely no accident, since David, perhaps more than any man of his time, had experienced God’s ironic judgment upon himself. However, that he so often records the principle is a demonstration that he learned from it with a repentant attitude. But what was this judgment upon David, and what had he done to deserve it? Second Samuel 12:9–11 summarizes the sin and judgment:

You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife. . . . Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house. . . . I will even take your wives before your eyes and give them to your companion, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight.

Surely David was being punished by means of the very sins that he had committed. David's murder of Uriah by the sword was punished by his sons Amnon and Absalom being likewise murdered (cf. 2 Sam. 13; 18). And just as David committed adultery with another's wife, so his wives became similarly abused (2 Sam. 16:22). David should not have been surprised by the severity of this ironic penalty, since he would have remembered a similar fate by another king during his youth. Perhaps the verdict pronounced by Nathan the prophet echoed in David's mind the sentence passed on Agag, king of the Amalekites, by Samuel the prophet: "As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women. And Samuel hewed Agag to pieces before the LORD at Gilgal" (1 Sam. 15:33). The ironic judgment of Saul must have been evident even before his suicide: "Because you [Saul] have rejected the word of the Lord, He [God] has also rejected you from being king" (1 Sam. 15:23). And, of course, the suicidal end of Saul's life should have been clearer in mind. Nevertheless, as we will see, David's own life is spared, and his curse is turned ultimately into a blessing because of his repentant spirit.

David's case is instructive, since it shows that even believers in the Lord "reap what they sow." Their punishment may not have the eternal dimension as with the unbeliever, but it is nonetheless real. Just as Jacob the believer deceived his father Isaac through wearing the skins of goats and masquerading himself as Esau, so Jacob was deceived by his sons when they masqueraded Joseph's death by sprinkling goat's blood on Joseph's tunic. Arthur Pink has well said:

Though God forgives His people their sins, yet He frequently gives them plain proof of His holy abhorrence of the same, and causes them to taste something of the bitter fruits which they bring forth.³

3. A. W. Pink, *The Life of David*, vol. 2 (Swengel, PA: Reiner, 1976), 24.

Christians should well consider their actions and the possible consequences. How many Christian young people desire to be married? Yet the primary qualities sought in a potential mate are often attractive appearance and personality. Spiritual motivations and commitment to the Lord are too often overlooked. When a Christian marries a non-Christian troubles are bound to come. The unbeliever cannot understand the spiritual zeal of his Christian mate. Consequently, the unbelieving mate reacts antagonistically to spiritual activities such as family devotions, mealtime prayer, and church attendance. This reaction is inevitable because of the non-Christian mate's exclusive focus on the physical realm.

The point is that when Christians emphasize external realities when choosing a spouse, this choice can be the very thing that curses them later. The very things wrongly viewed as blessings at the beginning ironically become the very things that plague and thwart the attempted spiritual growth of Christians. This can affect the children of such marriages as well! Solomon's pursuit of sexual and political indulgence with an abundance of wives likewise came back to haunt him, for it was this very thing that "turned his heart away after other gods" (1 Kings 11:4). How ironic that the author of the ideal marriage relationship (Song of Solomon) did not heed his own lessons. Like his father, David, Solomon too later realized the futility of his sin (cf. Eccles. 2:8-11). In so many ways, we can be judged by the very things we want to think are right but are really sinful. "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Prov. 14:12).

Your Sins Will Find You Out

Although God's people are viewed as suffering under his chastening hand, the ironic judgment of unbelievers receives much description in the Bible, especially those who represent the kingdom of Satan. With such people in mind, David proclaims in Psalm 10:2, "In pride