

A.W. Pink:

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Does God punish nations for their wickedness under the Christian dispensation as He did during Old Testament times? If He did not we should have to discontinue the use of many of the Psalms in the praise of God. David often speaks of the righteousness of God's judgment against the nations, and if it were a glorious expression of the Divine justice in the days of old to punish guilty nations, why is it to be thought that He is now weary of exhibiting such specimens of the excellency of His administration? It is still true that the Lord of hosts will be exalted in judgment and that His holiness will be sanctified in righteousness. The kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ had not been long established in the world before a wrath came upon Judah to the uttermost, because that people had killed Jesus the Savior, and slain the Prophets and Apostles whom He sent unto them (Matt. 22:7; 1 Thess. 2:16).

The book of the Revelation gives us a concise view of the series of Divine administration in the world under seven seals, seven vials, and seven trumpets—and it is plain that the calamities predicted under each were judgments to be inflicted upon the peoples for their iniquities. Under the fifth seal we find a complaint presented before God by the souls of those who were slain for His Word and for the testimony of Jesus. Under the sixth seal we find a prediction of tremendous revolutions announced against their persecutors. Under the trumpets awful judgments were inflicted on the nations for sins that are expressly named. After the sounding of the sixth trumpet it is said that the men which were not killed by these plagues, “yet repented not of the works of their hands, that they should not worship devils, the idols of gold and silver,” etc. (Rev. 9:20, 21). When the third vial was poured out and the fountain of water became blood, John heard a voice saying, “Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments” (16:7). So, too, mystical Babylon is to be destroyed because she is “the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth.”

But it may be objected: Is it not inconsistent with that humility which becomes such short-sighted creatures as we are to ascribe the particular transgressions which have kindled the Divine displeasure against those nations which are ruined by the agents of His providence? It would certainly be inconsistent with that reverence which we owe to God and that charity we owe to our fellow creatures to assign reasons for their calamities, when we are not authorized by the Word of God to do it. But the Scriptures plainly tell us what those offenses are which ordinarily bring down the displeasure of God on guilty nations, and they require us to give Him the glory due unto His works by observing and acknowledging His righteousness. Wise men who contemplate the works of nature inquire why the great Creator has given to various creatures different powers, propensities, and instincts. But how would they understand the wisdom and goodness of their Maker if they should, through an affected humility, disclaim all knowledge of His intentions in dispensing His gifts so variously? And how can we make that improvement of the works of the King of nations if we shut our eyes against that light by which we might judge of the reasons of His conduct?

The Scriptures tell us what those crimes were for which God spread desolation and misery over many countries in ancient times. If we knew that the same or the like crimes abounded in those countries which have recently been the theater of the judgments of Heaven, ought we not to be impressed with a new sense of that holiness which appears in the ways of the Lord and to learn righteousness when His judgments are on the earth? Our Lord censured those who thought that the men on whom the tower of Siloam fell were greater sinners than others in Jerusalem. And we, too, would deserve severe censure if we should pretend to judge of the degree of criminality chargeable on any nation from the calamities which have befallen it. Those are not always the most wicked nations that are first or that are most awfully punished. The Chaldeans were the worst of the heathens, and yet they were the ministers of Divine Providence in the punishment of all the surrounding nations (Ezek. 7; Jer. 25).

The Sovereign Ruler of the earth gives no account of His matters, and we can claim no right to call Him to account. He has reasons worthy of Himself for His conduct when He extends His patience to some people or nations to a greater degree than He does to others less wicked. But while we give Him the glory of His sovereignty, we ought not to hide our eyes from the plain proofs which He is pleased to give us of His hatred of sin. The old lying Prophet who deceived the man of God of Judah and tempted him to eat bread when God had forbidden him to was undoubtedly a greater sinner than the Prophet whom he deceived, yet the patience of God to that offender should not hinder us from admiring His wisdom and justice in punishing a good Prophet for his disobedience.

Many nations have been in our day (1810) brought very low. Several thrones have been subverted (by Napoleon). It is our duty to hear the voice of God in such tremendous dispensations calling upon us to learn righteousness from His judgments which are abroad in the earth. But how can we learn righteousness from them if we affect to be ignorant of a truth so often taught in the Bible—that fat lands are turned into barrenness and countries covered with desolation for the iniquities of those who dwell in them (Psalm. 107; Amos 9). Far be from us to infer from the miseries of any nations the sins for which they are punished. This

would be to imitate the reprobated conduct of Job's friends, who judged him to be a hypocrite and atheist because he suffered the most grievous afflictions from the Providence of God. But when we know that nations have greatly sinned against God, and that they have greatly suffered, we may justly infer that their sins were the cause of their sufferings. God's ways, like Himself, change not.

The New Testament Prophet speaks of vials full of the last Judgment to be poured out upon the Beast and his worshipers. When those vials are poured forth, praise is given to God by those who had escaped from infection: "great and marvelous are Your works Lord God Almighty: just and true are Your ways, You King of saints, Who would not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name, for You only are holy for Your judgments are made manifest" (Rev. 15:3, 4). Are we not taught in those words that the ground of God's quarrel with the Popish nations, when they shall be visited with His judgments, is to be made so manifest as to afford just cause for praise! Some may object, If by the worshipers of the Beast are meant Romanists, they cannot deserve grievous judgments for holding fast a religion which they had been taught by their fathers and which they sincerely believe is well-pleasing to God. Answer: the Israelites who revolted under Jeroboam believed the worship of idols was acceptable to the Lord, yet the error of their judgment did not shelter them from His vengeance.

The perversion of religion in Israel was accompanied by many other vices which were so many causes of God's wrath against them. And are not the errors of Popery equally inimical to good morals? It is a pernicious deceit to suppose it is of no great consequence what men believe if their morals are good. Our faith ought to be pure as well as our morals, and corruptions in faith never fail to have an immoral tendency. Woe be unto us, who abhor the errors of Popish nations, and yet are perhaps as bad in many respects as they are, and in some respects worse. Our sins are greatly aggravated by the superior advantages that we enjoy. We have been wonderfully preserved from threatened judgments—let us not be high-minded, but fear. God does what He pleases but His justice as well as His mercy endures forever.

There are other reasons beside the punishing of guilty nations for which God makes use of His battle-axe and weapons of war, in the destructive work for which they are fitted. By the revolutions accomplished in the world He gives striking manifestations to mankind of the vanity and instability of all earthly things, and of the infinite difference between those glories of the world which so much dazzle the eyes of beholders, and the glory of His own eternal throne. We walk too much by sight, and not by faith. When we see men elevated to uncommon heights of power we almost think they are immortal. When we behold cities enriched by commerce or the spoils of enemies, surrounded with strong fortifications and defended by mighty armies, we almost think they are eternal cities, as Babylon and Rome were once thought to be by their inhabitants, and perhaps by their enemies, too. When a kingdom has stood long in its strength we are ready to dream that such kingdoms are everlasting.

Thus we are tempted to give those honors to men and sublunary things which are due only to Him who lives forever and ever. By the fall of mighty kingdoms and the subversion of thrones, we are made not only to see but feel the folly of trusting in princes, of bestowing excessive admiration on earthly grandeur, and of looking more at things seen and temporal than those which are eternal. When the day of the Lord is upon the cedars of Lebanon, the oaks of Bashan and the ships of Tarshith, His intention is that the things which are great and high in the eyes of short-sighted men may be brought low, that the Lord alone may be exalted. Thus when the Prophet predicted the destruction of the glorious city of Tyre—the London of those days—he assigned this reason for God's awful purpose against that city: "The LORD of hosts has purposed it to stain the pride of all glory to bring into contempt all the honorable of the earth" (Isa. 23:9).

We ought certainly to mourn when God punishes guilty nations for the misery of our fellow creatures and for the indications which He gives us of His displeasure against them. But if we believe the world is governed by the providence of Him who sees what is past and to come at one glance, we ought not to confine our views of the works of God to their present appearance but to remember that what He is now doing tends to something else, which in His time He will show who is the blessed and only Potentate, and that in His whole administration He keeps in view ends worthy of His wisdom and grace. Generations may indeed pass away one after another before those glorious results appear to men which are well known beforehand to the all-seeing Eye. We ought to satisfy ourselves with the well-grounded assurance that all the glorious things which are spoken of the City of our God shall be fulfilled, that not one good thing said or her shall fail. He will bring light out of darkness and life out of death.

Perhaps we are too dim-sighted to see how those revolutions which bring so much misery and desolation can contribute to the good of mankind in their remoter consequences. We can however see how the prosperity of nations only too often tends to the increase of vice by giving opportunities to men to gratify their lusts. In such cases sore calamities are necessary for checking the progress of wickedness and forcing them, if they will not be virtuous, to set at least some bounds to their vices. History shows how the power of kings has often been employed to obstruct the progress of the Gospel, and therefore the destruction of their powers makes a way for the free course of the Lord's Word. Former revolutions have been made instrumental in the diffusion of the knowledge of Christ in ways that no human sagacity could have foreseen or conjectured. When the mystery of God is finished we shall see more clearly how He has brought a clean thing out of an unclean.

Another thing taught by our text (Jer. 51:20) is that when God is pleased to bring about awful revolutions in kingdoms He ordinarily makes use of men for His instruments. By so doing He shows forth His glory as the universal Lord, who rules not only in the raging of the sea but in the tumults of the people. It is His glory to make use of wicked dispositions and the unholy works of the worst of men for the accomplishment of His purpose. He makes the wrath and pride of man to praise Him. The robber, the murderer, the destroyer of nations are His servants. While they are, to the utmost of their power, doing the work of His great enemy, yet they are accomplishing His holy counsels. It is very wonderful in our eyes that the will of God should be fulfilled even by His greatest enemies: thereby He magnifies His righteousness as the Governor of the world, not suffering wickedness either in individuals or nations to pass unpunished.

But what is most astonishing in this view of the Divine Providence is that even God's works of grace are carried on, not only in defiance of all the opposition that is made to them, but by means of the worst actions of wicked men and devils. Nebuchadnezzar, by the revolutions which he accomplished in many countries, prepared the way for the diffusion of the Gospel when it should be preached to the Gentiles. He scattered the Jews, the only nation that knew the true God, many of whom never returned to their own land. Thereby the Gentiles in many lands had some seeds of true religion scattered among them, which were to bring forth an abundant increase in days to come. It might easily be shown that all the great revolutions of the past contributed their part to the happy success of the Gospel in later times, and we have no reason to doubt that the present shaking of nations will have like consequences, although we cannot name the time or the manner in which the Lord will finish His "strange work" in righteousness and mercy.

The variety of God's works is no inconsiderable part of their glory. David praises Him in strains of rapture for the endless variety of His works of nature. He is no less worthy of praise for the wonderful variety of His works in the moral government of the world. It will at least be clearly seen that both when He is pleased to destroy nations by His own immediate agency (as at the Flood) or by employing human instruments, He acts in a manner most conducive to the fulfillment of His purposes. If He had punished all those guilty nations that had made themselves obnoxious to His justice by fire from Heaven, the history of mankind must have been completely different from what it is, and many works had been left undone which are the objects of high praise in the Psalms and in the prophetic writings of the Old and New Testaments.

Let us now draw some practical reflections from our text. 1. We learn one great advantage to be derived from history. When we survey the works of nature we lose the chief part of the pleasure and advantage which we might derive from the view if we forget they are the works of God. Truly the light is sweet and a pleasant thing it is to behold the sun, but this pleasure is greatly heightened and turned to devotion when we hear the voice of the heavens declaring the glory of God and the firmament showing His handiwork. So, too, we deprive ourselves of the richest advantage which history affords if we do not remember that the events which it records are the wondrous works of Him who is perfect in wisdom.

We are rightly saddened when we read of the fall of mighty empires and the carnage which has often been spread by the sword of the warrior. But we should remember that the sword of war is the sword of the Lord: that He musters the hosts of battle—that when mighty conquerors go forth they are the instruments of His Providence for accomplishing those overturnings which for wise ends He determined before any of us were born. With the same disposition we should read or hear the accounts which we receive daily of those events which are now happening in the world. Let us not forget that all men and their actions are under the superintendence of One who never errs. "I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things" (Isa. 45:7). If we hear of awful events we ought to admire that Providence which will bring order out of confusion and make darkness light to those who love Him.

There were heretics of old who confessed that all rational creatures were made by God but vile and noxious ones were made by the Devil. You are perhaps amazed that such foolish notions should enter the minds of men, but is it not equally unreasonable to suppose that the Providence of God is active only in the good and not in the wicked actions of men, that our blessings come from Him, but our calamities proceed from no higher course than some principle of evil? It is exceedingly dishonoring of God to suppose that any sin can be committed without His permission or any calamity befall men or nations that was not appointed for them in His eternal purpose.

2. Give unto God the glory of the awful dispensations of His Providence towards sinful nations. In Psalms 50, 105, 106, 135 we find praise is given to God for His judgments upon guilty people which shows that there is a Divine excellency in such works, which excellency we are to gladly acknowledge. The entire book of Ecclesiastes is devoted unto an exposure of the vanities and vexations which cleave to every earthly enjoyment. In the Lamentations God's people are taught to consider their distresses as a chastisement from the Almighty. Behold the desolations which He has wrought in the earth, and know that He is a just God as well as a Savior. Though slow to anger, He is great in power and will not at all acquit the wicked. When you see the desolation He has wrought in the earth be still and know that He is God. He will be exalted among the nations. While we give Him glory as the God to whom vengeance belongs, let us not forget that mercy which He remembers in the midst of wrath. There is mercy to mankind even in those terrible calamities which bear hardest on our spirits when worse evils are prevented thereby and when we have reason to believe that good

will result from them. The casting away of the Jews has brought salvation unto the Gentiles (Rom. 11:11). What would have been the consequence if God had suffered wicked nations to walk age after age in their own ways without sending some of His terrible judgments to check the progress of sin? The world would scarcely have been habitable through that excessive wickedness which would have overspread the nations. If men are not generally reformed by the judgments of God, they are at least incapacitated to be so wicked as they might otherwise be. What would be the state of any nation if there were no magistrates to punish crime? And what would the world become if the King of nations suffered their wickedness always to remain unpunished? Admire, then, the wisdom of Him who brings good out of evil.—(good). Lawson.

THE DIVINE AGENCY IN WAR

Jeremiah 51:20

George Lawson

3. The glory of the Divine sovereignty ought likewise to be acknowledged in the destruction of kingdoms and desolation of countries. If God should be pleased to inflict His tremendous judgments upon all sinning nations, the sons of men would soon be utterly consumed. He destroys some while He spares others, and who shall ask Him why He bears with nations more guilty than those whom He destroys and inflicts His vengeance upon those whose wickedness admitted of some excuse? His judgments are unsearchable and His ways past finding out when He suffers some to live, become old and wax mighty in power, while others less wicked perish in youth. Instead of questioning His absolute sovereignty over the nations, admire His patience to us.

4. We ought to give glory to our Savior as well as to the Father who has committed all judgment to Him. God has given Him power to destroy as well as to save. The destruction of Jerusalem was one of the great days of the Son of man, in which His glory appeared in the destruction of His enemies as well as in the salvation of His followers. Then was fulfilled, in part, what our Lord foretold in the presence of the Sanhedrin (Matt. 26:64). The God of Zion lives, the King of Zion reigns over the nations: let the children of Zion be joyful in their King, and give praise to His name for His great and terrible acts even though they perceive not His intention. He did all things well when He was on earth. He does all things well in Heaven.

5. We ought to take warning from the destruction of kingdoms by Divine judgments. Some tell us the ways of God are so incomprehensible to us that it is not consistent with the modesty and humility of such short-sighted creatures as we are to presume to give an account of His awful dispensations. He does what pleases Him and gives not account of any of His matters, and although we ought to believe He does always what is right, yet the special grounds on which this judgment ought to be formed are often so high above us that we must leave them to the secrets of God. True, we cannot penetrate the depths of any of the Divine counsels, yet much is said in Scripture about the grounds of God's displeasure against those nations whom He destroys, and Christian humility does not require us to regard those passages as sealed. Israel sinned greatly in the desert because they understood not the wonders of the Lord in Egypt, nor remembered the multitude of His mercies.

Our Lord, we are told, warns us in Luke 13:1, 2 against presumptuous intrusions into the secrets of God's counsel. True, He warns against the supposition that those whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices were greater sinners than others, yet in the very next verse Christ declared the miserable fate of those men was a warning to all His hearers to repent, lest they, too, perish. We should learn from His words there not to reckon ourselves better men or our nation a less guilty one than those which have lately been spoiled of their independence, merely because we have not suffered like judgments, and we should also learn that the Lord's voice in these judgments calls loudly to us, that we, too, may justly fear as great, or greater miseries, unless we repent.

But if their fate was a warning to others of the danger of impenitency, then sin must have been the cause of their miseries. It is not the execution of innocent men but of criminals that warns spectators not to violate the laws of their country. Charity does not require us to be blind to the faults of other men or nations. If we do not believe anything to the disadvantage either of nations or of individuals when we have clear evidence of its truth, all history would be useless, for its pages are filled with accounts of human wickedness. When we know that all ranks of a nation are chargeable with the very iniquities which Scripture declares bring the wrath of God upon a people, ought we not to fear lest the same crimes among ourselves, if repentance prevail not, will bring the same ruin upon our own heads?

We may readily discover (especially from the book of Jeremiah) what were the charges which Good's Prophets brought against the people of Israel and Judah. And it cannot be denied that many of the same sins are prevalent among ourselves and that we have persisted in them in opposition to many warnings of the Word and Providence of God. Can it be denied that our iniquities have been highly aggravated by the greatness and clearness of our light by great and signal mercies, by solemn engagements to cleave unto the Lord? When God speaks to us by His Word can we be so impious as to turn a deaf ear to Him? When He confirms the solemn declarations of His Word by many awful works of His Providence, what excuse is left us if we are still disobedient to His voice? [Shall it also be said of Great Britain "I gave her space to repent, and she repented not?"—A.W.P.]

Is not a loud cry heard from every part of the Continent, that God is greatly displeased with the sins of the nations? What is Napoleon that he should be able to do so great things? The iniquities of the nations have put the sword into his hand and strengthened his arm. God is sore displeased with the contempt of His Gospel and Sabbaths, with the degeneracy of the Christian churches, with the wickedness of men of every rank, and has given commission to that terrible minister of His Providence to cut off and destroy nations not a few. Flee sin as from the face of a serpent. If all the serpents of the dust were commissioned to destroy us, they could not do us half the mischief that we have procured by our sins.

6. Use the means prescribed for averting from our land the dreadful calamities that have come upon other countries. But what can we do? Have we counsel or strength for war against an enemy flush with conquest, and conducted to new victories by commanders renowned for their courage and skill? Yet if you were called to expose your life for your king and country, such considerations ought not to deter you from a plain duty. If God be our Helper, we need not fear what man can do against us. But if that man is unworthy of the benefits which he derives from the government of his country, who would refuse to expose his life for its defense when Divine Providence calls him to do it? How much less does he deserve to share in these blessings who is so far from bearing his part in its defense that he adds, by his obstinacy in sin, to the causes of its danger, and perhaps of its ruin?

Our defense is in God, and He who provokes our Defender to depart from us is as really an enemy to his country as he who is chargeable with treason against the king. Although we should not increase the anger of the Lord by cursing and lying and other iniquities which bring down His wrath upon guilty nations, yet if we do not contribute our endeavor, in our places, to that reformation of conduct by which our judgments might be averted, we are but cold friends to our country. Yes, by neglecting what God requires of us as means of preventing judgments, we act the part of public enemies. They lie unto the Lord who pray to Him for the safety and success of our fleets and armies and yet do not sincerely desire and earnestly endeavor to have those evils removed which, if God governs the nations, are the most formidable obstacles to their success. Turn you to Him from whom we have all deeply revolted; warn and exhort all on whom you can have influence to turn from the evil of their ways. Thus did the king and people of Nineveh: and they were spared.

7. Seek safety to yourselves in the evil day if it should come upon others. We cannot certainly say what will be the end of these wonders that are now taking place in the world. Who knows whether Britain will be able at all times to make an effectual resistance to the conqueror of the Continent? But we know that there is a kingdom which cannot be moved, and that all the faithful subjects of its King shall enjoy full security under His government. When God, by His Prophets, foretells the most tremendous events that shall ever come upon the world, He gives full assurance to His people that although He make a full end of the other nations, He will not make a full end of them.

Take the yoke of Christ upon you and learn of Him, and you shall not only be safe in the evil day but you shall look down with pity upon these oppressors that waste and destroy the nations of the world. We cannot certainly say that you shall be exempted from all share in these evils that go about from nation to nation. It may be you shall be hid in the day of the Lord's anger. But if you should fall by the hand of violence, angels will be sent down from Heaven to receive your souls and to conduct them to the abodes of bliss, where no tyrant that wears a diadem, no ruffian that carries a sword can reach you—where you shall share with Christ in those glories which the Father gave Him.

When Habakkuk heard of the awful works which God was about to do in the land, his belly trembled, his lips quivered at the voice, rottenness entered into his bones (3:16), yet he comforted himself with the well-grounded hope that he would rest in the day of evil and find everlasting solace and joy in the God of His salvation. "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines, the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no food; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet will I rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength, and He will make my feet like hinds' feet, and He will make me to walk upon mine high places" (Hab. 3:17-19).

The overthrow of thrones and the desolation of kingdoms are terrible events: but we know of events far more awful for guilty men. The earth and its works shall be burned up: the heavens being on fire, shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat. In that day all the oppressors of the earth, if they died impenitent, shall receive the full recompense of all the indignities they did to God—of all the slaughter and devastation of which they were the guilty instrument. But all who were found faithful to God in evil times shall then also receive full reward of all that they did for the service of God and the benefit of men. If those who would not give a share of their bread to the hungry and of their drink to the thirsty shall have their part in the Lake of Fire with the devil and his angels, what chosen woes shall be the portion of the destroyers of their fellow-men? If every cup of cold water given to a disciple shall in no wise lose its reward, how rich will be the reward of those who exerted their utmost endeavors to convert sinners from the errors of their ways and to save guilty nations from destruction?!—(George Lawson, Minister of the Gospel, Selkirk, Scotland, 1811).