

Forum :

Controversial Discussion between Mr. Mark Punford and the Editor concerning the BRF position on:

God's Tender Mercies

This Discussion continued from page 47 of Issue No.18 of April-June 1997

Mr. Punford:

Fourthly, with respect to God's tender mercies being over all his works, surely the B.R.F do not want us to believe that this tenderness is not an emotion in God, but a mere outward set of acts which are consistent with those acts which genuine tenderness would produce whilst yet lacking the driving motive of that tenderness which could alone render the mercy concerned a mercy that is not one in name only? Is not mercy a matter of the heart before it can be a matter for the deed? And wherefore would God call it tender if tender it was not? Or are we to suppose that the reprobate wicked are not among the objects known as "his works" and therefore not party to the tender mercy concerned? Does the BRF honestly wish us to believe that, when, on the news say, we see a picture of tragedy, God is feeling none of that sorrow over the reprobate amongst such scenes —-which will be most of those pictured —-and sometimes all of them —-which we ourselves are disposed to feel? If so, why consider it tragic at all? For the elect among them will have their loss made up, and on this view of things, the reprobate receive only their just desert, and being in no sense the objects of God's compassion are not to be sentimentally pitied by the likes of us. Is not this portrayal of God's supposed character repulsive, counter -intuitive, anti-human and wholly implausible?

Editor's Response:

Herewith we print all the occurrences of the phrase "tender mercies" as found in Scripture:

Ps 25:6 Remember, O LORD, thy **tender mercies** and thy lovingkindnesses; for they [have been] ever of old.

Ps 40:11 Withhold not thou thy **tender mercies** from me, O LORD: let thy lovingkindness and thy truth continually preserve me.

Ps 51:1 To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba. Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy **tender mercies** blot out my transgressions.

Ps 69:16 Hear me, O LORD; for thy lovingkindness [is] good: turn unto me according to the multitude of thy **tender mercies**.

Ps 77:9 Hath God forgotten to be gracious? hath he in anger shut up his **tender mercies**? Selah.

Ps 79:8 O remember not against us former iniquities: let thy **tender mercies** speedily prevent us: for we are brought very low.

Ps 103:4 Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and **tender mercies**;

Ps 119:77 Let thy **tender mercies** come unto me, that I may live: for thy law [is] my

delight.

Ps 119:156 Great [are] thy **tender mercies**, O LORD: quicken me according to thy judgments.

Ps 145:9 The LORD [is] good to all: and his **tender mercies** [are] over all his works.

Pr 12:10 A righteous [man] regardeth the life of his beast: but the **tender mercies** of the wicked [are] cruel.

A careful check through these references yields the following information:

1. In the last reference, Prov. 12 : 10 the phrase is predicated of a human , and is therefore eliminated from our discussion - we are concerned with the "tender mercies" of God.

2. All the other references when examined in their context, indicate God's elect only as the object of these tender mercies. This applies too to the one reference in which at first sight it might look to apply to all.....Ps. 145:9. But this Psalm draws to a conclusion through verse 20 : "The Lord preserveth all them that love Him, but all the wicked He will destroy."

A strange kind of "tender mercy" that, that finishes up destroying its objects!

The Scriptures teach :Rom 9:22 [What] if God, willing to shew [his] wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction:

In longsuffering the non-elect, God extends to them a thousand temporal mercies, rain, sunshine, harvests, thus prolonging their lives and maintaining their generations. So:

Mt 5:45 He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

Why? Without His longsuffering granting the wicked these temporal mercies, none of them could exist. And if none of them could exist, future generations of the elect could never be born by natural generation. In Scripture the grain in the ears of wheat is used as a symbol of God's elect, whereas the reprobate are symbolised by "the chaff which the wind driveth away" (Psalm 1). But without the chaff, the grain could never grow. And the sun and the rain are necessarily given for the chaff to develop as assuredly as for the grain to develop. For the sake of the grain, the chaff gets a blessing. But the blessing given to the chaff is not for its salvation, it's for the elect's salvation. As for the chaff, at the harvest, it gets winnowed away and burned. So we are taught in Psalm 1. One sees practical examples in history of this happening. For instance, if God had not borne with long-suffering our pagan ancestors, but instead had withheld from them the temporal blessings of this life, then they would have perished without progeny.....progeny from whom God had already ordained the elect should arise. Those forefathers were indeed "chaff", and the wind of Divine justice has eventually borne them away for burning, having separated from them the elect "grain".

And so Psalm 145 can also say:

"Thou openest thy hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing." (Verse 16) Yea, He satisfies the desire of the chaff, and they develop fully as chaff! And yea! He brings forth the grain from out of the chaff, and satisfiest the desire of the grain as grain, and it fully develops as grain!

The chaff, therefore, performs its God-ordained function, as God longsuffers it. For the sake of the grain. And as the grain is the whole purpose aimed at by the farmer in all his ploughing, seeding, tending, and harvesting, so the Scriptures teach us that the whole of creation is to the end of God's glory in the redemption of the elect through Christ.

Again, in blessing directly His own elect with His tender mercies, much of this spreads out naturally to the reprobate simply by virtue of the fact that the elect are in the same material world as them. Blessed of God, the elect are moved spiritually to love their neighbours as themselves, and in consequence reprobates receive benefits secondarily. Some might

object here, "Ah! If God requires us to love our neighbours as ourselves, reprobates or not, then surely He must love them in the same way, reprobates or not."

However, certain things are appropriate to us, which are not appropriate to God. And certain things are appropriate to God which are not appropriate to us. Vengeance belongs to God, He will recompense. But we are forbidden to take revenge. Thus:

Ro 12:19 Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but [rather] give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance [is] mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

Indiscriminate love of neighbours as ourselves is required of us rightfully under God's law, and this law is not suspended because men are fallen creatures. And we do not know who of the present ungodly are yet to manifest the fruitage of the election of grace. It is appropriate therefore, that as creatures subject to God's law, we are obligated to uphold His law. His law is not abrogated or suspended because of our sin.

But now, God is God, and from His Sovereign position and prerogative, His application of the Law is unique to Him. Thus He hates the very reprobate, whom we are commanded to love as our neighbours, because as God, He alone can rightfully judge them and condemn them justly for their sin. That is, He alone can rightfully deny them neighbour-love on account of their sin.

Further, any blessings which accrue to the reprobate must be seen in the light of Scripture, not personal feeling or predilection. And Scripture informs us directly that one of the primary purposes for which God sends rain and sun on the reprobate is to bring them to fullness of development in sin and ready for judgment. For such a reason God showered Pharaoh with "favours", great riches, power, and dominion. All this not because God "loved" Pharaoh, but for the reason St. Paul states as follows:

Rom. 9:17 For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth.

Thus, as one old Puritan said somewhere, God sends His sun and rain on the dunghheap as well as on the daffodil. The daffodil opens its beautiful head, and gives fragrance and delight, but the dunghheap rots even more under the same "blessing" of rain and sun. Indeed, in this life, some dunghheaps may get a hundred times more "blessing" of rain and sun than many a daffodil, but though this might mean that the daffodil is a weak and poor specimen of its breed, it's still a daffodil, and in the meantime, none of those "well-blessed" dunghheaps will have become daffodils. They will all just stink worse and worse.....

Psalms 73 says it all. In the apparent "blessing" of the wicked, God has surely "set them in slippery places: thou castest them down to destruction" (vv. 16ff.).

Again, some further points relating to this reference should be noted:

First: Are **all things ontologically existent** to be rightly denominated: "*The works of God*"?

If **no**, then the text obviously discriminates between ontologically existent entities which are good, and those which are evil, the latter being excluded as "works of God", and therefore excluded from the aegis of His "tender mercies".

If **yes**, then in what sense? True, the Devil and Hell are the works of God in that He created them, and sustains their existence. True, He did not create the Devil as a Devil, but note:

i) He knew from before He created Lucifer that Lucifer would become the Devil

ii) Now that Lucifer is the Devil, the Divine power maintains the Devil in existence. Does this mean then that God has "tender mercies" over the Devil?

Second: God created Hell for the wicked. After the day of Judgment to Hell they will go.

Presumably then: If God's tender mercies are over them now in this present life of their wickedness, then after the Day of Wrath either:

a) God will undergo a deep and powerful fundamental change in His feelings toward them, or:

b) God will still have "tender mercies" of feeling toward them when they are in hell. In which case He will spend eternity coping with deep regrets. Also such a conception of God is chargeable either with

i) the hypocrisy of "crocodile tears"

or:

ii) Lacking in Sovereign power to achieve what He really wants to achieve, i.e., to get the wicked, and the Devil and all the demons, and the reprobate, back out of Hell, and thereby fully express the tender mercies which He still feels for them. After all, as Mr. Punford correctly says in his opening sentences above, true tender mercies must consist in there being a heart of love toward the object of those mercies, and must lead to action. And if God is Omnipotently Sovereign, what hinders the action, if His tender mercies are still over the damned?

We would therefore regard God's tender mercies to be, like God, efficient, and self-fulfilling in perfection towards the objects of mercy. Only the elect meet this criterion. A failure to appreciate this means that one has to predicate of God a greater "tender mercy" toward the Devil than He does to humanity. For God has sustained the Devil in existence as the Devil for at least the six millennia of Biblical history, each human being He only suffers to exist for 70 years or a little longer. And God allows (sic) the Devil to tempt, take prisoner, blind, and harden those humans.

A peculiar kind of "tender mercy" this, that has more "tender mercy" on the arch-tormentor than on his victims!

Furthermore, it must be noticed that Mr. Punford goes on to produce what is the popular modern evangelical picture of God, as one that must have "feelings" like human beings do. This, it must be said, is also the Modernist picture of God, indeed, it is the modernist "god of love". After the Dunblane massacre, Professor Donald Macleod said that God "groaned." Macleod goes on to say: "One of the platforms of my theology, in fact, is the doctrine of divine passibility derived from the experience of pain that God has gone through in Jesus" (BBC Radio Scotland 30 June 1996).

The effect of all this is to erect a portrait of "God" which is in reality nothing more than a cosmic projection of human nature. And since human nature is fallen, it cannot provide an ontological platform for making such a projection, even were the exercise per se valid, which it cannot be, since it is in principle an exercise in idolatry, that is, it carves a "God" in the image of what human reason deduces.

We ourselves, did indeed, groan on receiving news of the Dunblane massacre. But to project that cosmically out on to God is pagan. We groaned, as human beings it was appropriate that we should, and understandable that we should. We should also have feared, and trembled. For it is at moments like that that reality breaks through the mists of the fool's paradise we sinners have woven around us to maintain creature comfort. This world is damned.....it awaits its judgment, it awaits its Day of Wrath.....2Pe 3:7 But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. 1Pe 4:18 And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?

Thus, appropriately, *we* groan over human tragedy. But it is idolatry to reason from that that God also groaned. Will He be groaning on that day spoken of in 2 Pe 3:7? A day which will make every human tragedy, however dreadful, look so insignificant it disappears into the mass of terrors of Judgment? A day indeed, which will make all the horrors of the Second World War look distinctly palid? What we must learn here is that what is appropriate in man is not necessarily appropriate with God. That is, it is Christ-like for us to “love our neighbours as ourselves” and to speed compassion to them in their tragedies, and to warn them to “flee from the wrath to come”. But it is Christ-like in the risen Christ for Him to judge over mankind, and rule with His providences. That is, the manifestation of Christ’s character emerges differently according to the ontological station of the subject.

But modern evangelical Calvinism seems to reverse-reason from man to God, thereby inadvertently erecting an idol. Inadvertently Mr. Punford reverse-reasons here as well on this point, by implying at the end of his first paragraph, that if, as do the BRF, we hold that God would not have felt as we do over something like Dunblane, then “is not this portrayal of God’s supposed character repulsive, *counter-intuitive*, *anti-human* and wholly implausible?”

This is admitted reverse-reasoning, and Fallen man’s intuition is therefore made the standard for what God shall be like. Truth is, that Mr. Punford asserts too much here. His suggestion that God would be “repulsive” etc. if He did not have human-like feelings over a tragedy would argue also that God on the Day of Judgment will be “repulsive” etc. For clearly on that awful day there will be no inercy, no compassion....only the flame of pure justice. In human terms, that awful day will be the greatest human tragedy in all of history.

Mr. Punford suggests that unless God somehow “groans” over tragedies, then can we really count tragedies as tragedies? For in all of them, he says, “the elect among them will have their loss made up, and the reprobate receive only their just desert.”

Well, that is biblically true, is it not? Do not the Scriptures teach us that Christ the Lord will “wipe away all tears” from the eyes of His people, and that the reprobate will all be put to destruction with the devil and his demons? Is it not scriptural to assert that because of the work of Christ, all tragedy and all injustice will ultimately be over-ruled?

But in the meantime, we are still under the obligation of that law... “love thy neighbour as thyself”. And knowing that but for God’s grace we ourselves deserve nothing more than “tragedy”, we “feel” for those who suffer, though they be but reprobates.

Again, one has to say that what counts as a tragedy for one may be a blessing for another. To the Egyptians, the Red Sea debacle was the supreme tragedy, but for Moses and the Israelites, it was the pure blessing of God....so much so that the rejoicing Miriam took a timbrel and led out the women dancing and singing to celebrate it. (Ex. 15:20). The Scriptures and the Confessions are explicit. God is the starting point, the “Archimedian point” from which all else is to be deduced and understood. God reveals Himself through His Word, and it is what He says therein about Himself is what we must take as the foundation of all our intellectual science of Theology. Notably, the Scriptures, in recording for us the response of Paul and Barnabas to their “deification” by the Lycaonians, reveal, in Paul’s words, the folly of working from human apprehensions upwards to Divinity. Paul insisted, *inter alia*, that “we are men of like passions with you.....” and “ye should turn from these vanities....” (Acts 14 : 11). Thus the Westminster Confession asserts from this text that God is without “passions”, as are humans.(Conf. II : 1). Whilst Scripture truly speaks of “love” and “hatred” as present in God, we may not conceive of this in anthropomorphic terms, as if the immutable, impassive Almighty One was subject to transient emotions. Were He so, then how ever could we trust Him?

To be continued (DV).....