



Sin will be punished and our universe will be cleansed by the fire of God

• Earthly judgements may be forerunners of the final 'eternal destruction'

• This is good news

How can God allow sin and tragedy?

• Natural disasters

• Individual tragedies

• Because of 'the Fall' – evil came into the world because of the sin of the first humans

The fallen world is temporary

• Isaiah speaks of the judgement which will come upon sin – particularly religious cults

• Like a military invasion

Fire is used in judgement

Isaiah closes his book with the promise that sin will be punished and our universe will be cleansed by the fire of God. The great reformer John Calvin thought it doubtful whether Isaiah was including the final judgement in his final words or whether his vision had to do only with the earthly judgements. He preferred the view that the earthly judgements of this world were forerunners of the last 'eternal destruction'. ^aMatthew 25:46 suggests that he is right, for Jesus used the language of Isaiah to express his teaching concerning eternal punishment. So these closing verses of the book of Isaiah are sobering indeed. Yet in the end they are good news not bad news! The fire of God will cleanse our world. That is good news indeed. It is curious that those who object to the Christian faith do not like the phenomenon of sin and wickedness and calamity of various kinds that abound in our world. How can God allow sin and tragedy? We do not know!

The list of the things that trouble us is a long one. **It begins in the beginning!** Why did God create a universe where Satan arises – a fallen angel, so it seems? Why did God programme the universe in such a way that evil of many kinds is a possibility – and has become an actuality? The problem hits us hard in the realm of nature. One only has to be in a 'calamity of nature' to be overwhelmed with such questions. I was once myself on the edge of an earthquake in which 28,000 people were killed. Such an experience forces questions upon us in a most intense manner. Then, worse still, there are **tragedies that are more intensely focused in the individual person**: accidents in which young children are killed or untimely deaths due to cancer. A friend of mine died of AIDS when she was twenty-eight years old, through no fault of her own. I was present at her side in a hospital as she was dying, unconscious, unable to speak. I could do nothing but pray and hope she could perhaps hear me. I still have not quite recovered from the experience, though it was many years ago. So we all ask the question, 'Why do bad things happen so much in our world?' It has something to do with 'the Fall'. Evil came into the world because of the sin of the first humans. Back behind the awful calamities that take place in our world is the fact of sin. God always knew it would happen. It was men and women who brought wickedness into the world, and (since the planet was tied in with the human race) when humanity fell the planet (maybe even the universe) fell at the same time. God was involved but so was human sin!

The good news is: such a fallen world is only temporary. The fire of God will cleanse it! Isaiah 65:15–17 speaks of the **judgement which will come upon sin, particularly upon the vile and disgusting religious cults of the ancient world.**

¹⁵For look, Yahweh is coming with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind; he will bring down his anger with fury, and will bring his rebuke with flames of fire.

The picture language here reminds us of military invasions in the ancient world. An avenging army would sweep into a village riding in their chariots. Then they would set fire to everything that could be destroyed. The picture comes many times in Amos ('I will send a fire . . . which shall devour . . .', says God, many times^{Ⓜ1}). God himself finally comes in the compensating, avenging, devouring fire of his holiness.

Ⓜ1 Amos 1:4, 7, 10, 12; 2:2; 5:6; 7:4

All over the Bible, fire speaks of damage and pain and suffering and removal – followed by the end of anything which is in the fire. Fire in the end destroys irreversibly, but it also brings pain and suffering along the way. Fire brings things to an end; it devours. Fire purifies. In the biblical imagery this could mean that the fire of God's judgement purifies the sinner^{Ⓜ1}. But it more often means that the fire of God's judgement purifies the world from the sinner

Ⓜ1 as in 1 Corinthians 3:15

• Fire speaks of damage, pain, suffering and removal – irreversible destruction

• God's judgement purifies the world from the sinner

• Two themes:
(i) Suffering
(ii) Removal of sin

• Gardens, pigs and abominations refer to pagan worship

• God personally abolishes evil

• Safety from God's anger can only come through Christ as our Passover Lamb

Note

(compare in the New Testament Matthew 3:10, 12; 5:22; 7:19; 13:40; 18:9; 25:41; Mark 9:43–47; Luke 3:7–9, 17). Fire speaks of thirst and terrible pain. We recall what happened in Leviticus 10:2: 'There went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.' The wicked sons of Aaron suffered – and were removed from planet earth. The two themes are generally involved in fiery judgement. There is suffering and in the outcome sin and maybe the sinner also are utterly removed. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age.

*¹⁶For with fire and with his sword
Yahweh will execute judgement upon all flesh;
and many will be those slain by Yahweh.*

*¹⁷Those who consecrate and purify themselves to go into the gardens,
following the one in the midst of those who eat the flesh of pigs and rats
and other abominable things — they will come to an end together' – it is
an oracle of Yahweh.*

The items mentioned here – gardens, pigs, religious abominations – all refer to different aspects of pagan worship which in the eighth century BC were defiling the temple and would go on doing so until God came like a whirlwind and Babylonian invasion put an end to Solomon's temple altogether.

We notice here that evil is abolished: 'they will come to an end'. It is God who does it. He personally reacts in anger against all sin. 'He enters for himself into judgement' (as the verb in verse 16 could be translated). This is good news! Evil is temporary. God's anger will remove it. It is this fiery anger of God against sin that required the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. Safety in a day of God's anger comes only when the Lord Jesus Christ is our Passover Lamb. When we shelter in him the anger of God passes us by, and then he leads us into a promised land. Sin is removed by fiery judgement or by reconciliation with God through Jesus. Either way the end of the story is good news!

^a J. Calvin, Commentary on . . . Isaiah (Eerdmans edition, 1948), p. 428.

Dr Michael Eaton (1942-2017) was highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. Born in the UK, he lived for many years in Kenya where he became a citizen. He was one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship in Nairobi. His Preaching through the Bible books are highly popular worldwide, written in a clear and down-to-earth style but underpinned by rigorous scholarship. Some of these books have been reformatted as individual sheets for personal and group study and preaching. The New Testament volumes have been re-edited and combined in the Branch Commentary. The Old Testament, including previously unpublished material will follow. More details: www.slices.org.uk.