When the Wicked Fall

Our starting point must be the teachings of Jesus and what He modelled. *Matthew 5:43-48* ***43*** *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor*[a] *and hate your enemy.'* ***44*** *But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,* ***45*** *that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.* ***46*** *If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?* ***47*** *And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?* ***48*** *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Even in the Old Testament we see God showing a lot of mercy. Solomon's request is instructive here. *1 Kings 3:5–12 At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you."* [6] *Solomon answered, "You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day.* [7] *"Now, Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties.* [8] *Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number.* [9] *So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?"* [10] *The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this.* [11] *So God said to him, "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice,* [12] *I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be.*

God is pleased that Solomon asks for discernment to administer justice rather than long life, riches or the death of his enemies. The request combines wisdom with concern for the people entrusted to him. Even within the Old Testament, we see God commending a desire to govern well rather than a preoccupation with enemies dying. The same emphasis appears in *2 Chronicles 1:10–12. Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead this people, for who is able to govern this great people of yours?" God said to Solomon, "Since this is your heart's desire and you have not asked for wealth, possessions or honor, nor for the death of your enemies, and since you have not asked for a long life but for wisdom and knowledge to govern my people over whom I have made you king, therefore wisdom and knowledge will be given you. And I will also give you wealth, possessions and honor, such as no king who was before you ever had and none after you will have."*

I find this a useful test of leadership prayer. Am I asking for wisdom to serve people faithfully, or am I consumed by the wish that everyone who troubles me should fall? My prayer life can reveal whether I am carrying responsibility or nursing resentment.

What happens when the language of prayer becomes the language of another person's destruction?

In some Christian settings on our continent, we encounter forceful declarations against enemies: commands for them to die, appeals for their lives to be cut short, and prayers that disaster should overtake them. This does not represent African Christianity as a whole. But wherever such language appears, the church must be willing to examine it.

Consider these words from a published compilation attributed to Nigerian preacher Dr D. K. Olukoya: “Oh Lord cut short the lives of those monitoring me for evil in Jesus’ name.” Elsewhere in the same compilation: “Oh God move my enemies from tragedy to tragedy.” Those are deeply sobering words to place on the lips of a praying Christian.

Fairness requires us to acknowledge that Olukoya has explained the familiar expression “Die by Fire” as a declaration against spiritual forces and the works of darkness, rather than a wish for physical harm against individuals. That distinction matters. It also raises a pastoral question: when we use this language, what do the people praying actually understand—and whom are they picturing?

These questions become especially urgent when a controversial public figure dies.

Following the helicopter crash that killed Zimbabwean businessman Wicknell Chivayo, his wife and three others, public reactions included both mourning and celebrations of his death. His wealth, political connections and disputed business dealings formed part of that response. But controversy does not give us knowledge of God’s hidden purposes in an accident.

Religious voices also entered the discussion. According to reporting on a video released on 2 October, Apostle Talent Farai Chiwenga warned, “I see a funeral at a funeral,” and declared, “This is what happens when God is not happy.” He was presenting a claimed prophetic warning about further deaths associated with the funeral. That is different from praying for someone to die, but it illustrates the certainty with which divine displeasure can be invoked around a tragedy.

At the other end, a preacher identified in reporting as belonging to the Zion Christian Church declared, “it is without doubt that he has gone to heaven.” Here, too, we must ask what warrants such certainty about a particular person’s eternal condition.

Church, are we supposed to speak this way? Can we oppose corruption without delighting in a human being’s death? Can we ask God to stop an evildoer while still longing for that person’s repentance? When we say, “In Jesus’ name,” do our desires reflect the character of Jesus?

These questions do not require us to minimise injustice. Victims need protection. Wrongdoing needs exposure. Those who abuse power must face accountability. Yet our commitment to justice must also submit to the searching light of Scripture.

James and John once wanted fire to fall upon people who had rejected Jesus. They had a biblical precedent in mind, but Jesus rebuked them. Their confidence did not make their response right.

2 Kings 1:9-12 Then he sent to Elijah a captain with his company of fifty men. The captain went up to Elijah, who was sitting on the top of a hill, and said to him, “Man of God, the king says, ‘Come down!’ ” Elijah answered the captain, “If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!” Then fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men. At this the king sent to Elijah another captain with his fifty men. The captain said to him, “Man of God, this is what the king says, ‘Come down at once!’ ” “If I am a man of God,” Elijah replied, “may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!” Then the fire of God fell from heaven and consumed him and his fifty men.

Luke 9:51-56 As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the

disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then he and his disciples went to another village.

So today, as we consider **When the Wicked Fall**, we must examine both the wrongdoing we condemn and the hearts from which we condemn it. In our attempt to figure out how we ought to live, the starting point must be God's character and nature as expressed in scripture.

2 Peter 3:9 "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

God's heart is for all to repent, therefore if this is not my heart and my prayer how can I be praying in His name. The prayer I am therefore praying is not represented by him. We see many examples in scripture where God would show His standard of justice and holiness and then man would intercede and mercy would triumph. **The outcomes differ: judgment may be withheld, delayed, limited, or brought to an end; sometimes forgiveness comes alongside continuing consequences.**

James 2:13 because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

This directly mirrors Jesus' teaching in the Gospels (like the Lord's Prayer and the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant). If a person is harsh, judgmental, and refuses to forgive or help others, they show that they haven't truly understood or accepted God's grace. Consequently, God will judge them by that same strict, unmerciful standard. **Mercy wins the day.** For those who have shown mercy and love to others, God's mercy stands as a shield against condemnation.

When God exposes sin, the intercessor's response is often to plead for mercy, protection and restoration while taking the wrongdoing seriously. Moses' repeated response to people who opposed him was to pray for their survival. This is a good example to follow for anyone whose first instinct is to pray for an opponent's destruction.

Example	Judgment or crisis	The intercession	Outcome and significance
Abraham intercedes for Sodom — Genesis 18:16–33; 19:29	God announces that Sodom and Gomorrah's grave wickedness will be investigated and judged.	Abraham appeals to God's justice, asking whether he will destroy the righteous with the wicked. He progressively asks about fifty righteous people down to ten.	God agrees to spare the city for ten. The cities are eventually destroyed, but Genesis 19:29 explicitly connects Abraham being remembered with Lot's rescue. **The intercession does not avert all judgment, but the account includes mercy and deliverance.**
Moses intercedes after the golden calf — Exodus 32:7–14, 30–35;	God announces his intention to destroy Israel and make a great nation from Moses.	Moses appeals to God's reputation among the Egyptians and his promises to Abraham,	God relents from the announced destruction of the people. Serious consequences still follow. **Moses seeks mercy for**

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Deuteronomy 9:18–20		Isaac and Israel. He later pleads for forgiveness.	**the very people whose sin has made his leadership difficult.**
Moses intercedes for Aaron — Deuteronomy 9:20	God's anger against Aaron is severe enough to threaten his destruction after the golden calf.	Moses records that he prayed for Aaron also.	Aaron survives. **Moses intercedes for a leader who bears real responsibility for the wrongdoing.**
Moses prays for Miriam's healing — Numbers 12:1–15	Following Miriam and Aaron's challenge to Moses, Miriam is struck with a serious skin disease.	Aaron appeals to Moses, and Moses cries out to God to heal her.	God prescribes seven days outside the camp, after which she is received back. **Moses seeks restoration for someone who has spoken against him; mercy does not remove every consequence.**
Moses intercedes after Israel rejects the promised land — Numbers 14:11–23	God threatens to strike Israel with a plague and disinherit them following their unbelief and rebellion.	Moses appeals to God's reputation among the nations and his revealed character: patient, loving, forgiving and just. He asks God to pardon the people.	God grants pardon, but the unbelieving generation will not enter the land. **Forgiveness and accountability coexist.**
Moses and Aaron intercede during Korah's rebellion — Numbers 16:20–24	God tells Moses and Aaron to separate themselves from the assembly so that he may consume it.	They fall facedown and appeal to God concerning whether the whole assembly should suffer because of one man's sin.	God directs the congregation to move away from the rebels' dwellings. Judgment falls on the rebels. **The narrative distinguishes the wider community from those leading the rebellion.**
Aaron stands between the living and the dead — Numbers 16:41–50	A plague begins after the congregation grumbles against Moses and Aaron.	Moses instructs Aaron to take incense and make atonement. Aaron runs into the assembly and stands between the living and the dead.	The plague stops, although many have already died. **The leaders urgently seek to save the people accusing them.**
Moses prays after the fiery serpents — Numbers 21:4–9	Venomous snakes come among the people after they	The people acknowledge their sin and ask Moses to pray. Moses intercedes.	God provides a means of healing through the bronze serpent. **The answer takes the form of a**

Example	Judgment or crisis	The intercession	Outcome and significance
	speak against God and Moses.		**saving provision that the people must respond to.**
Samuel intercedes after Israel's request for a king — 1 Samuel 12:16–25	Thunder and rain expose the seriousness of Israel's wrongdoing, and the people fear death.	They ask Samuel to pray. He reassures them and declares his continuing responsibility to pray for and teach them.	They are called to faithful obedience rather than abandonment to despair. **Samuel combines intercession with clear instruction and a warning against persistent wickedness.**
David pleads during the plague — 2 Samuel 24:10–25; 1 Chronicles 21:14–27	A plague follows David's sinful census.	David acknowledges his responsibility and asks that the judgment fall on him and his household rather than the people. He builds an altar and offers sacrifices as directed.	God answers prayer for the land, and the plague stops. **The guilty leader takes responsibility instead of shifting blame onto those affected.**
Amos intercedes over visions of judgment — Amos 7:1–6	Amos sees visions of locusts and consuming fire threatening Jacob.	He appeals for forgiveness and asks how Jacob can survive, being so small.	In both cases, the Lord relents and says the threatened event will not happen. **These are especially clear examples of a prophet pleading for mercy rather than welcoming devastation.**

A related case is **Hezekiah praying for worshippers who were ceremonially unprepared at Passover**. He asks the good Lord to pardon those whose hearts are set on seeking God, despite their failure to meet the purification requirements. The Lord hears him and heals the people.

2 Chronicles 30:18–20 *Although most of the many people who came from Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar and Zebulun had not purified themselves, yet they ate the Passover, contrary to what was written. But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, "May the Lord, who is good, pardon everyone* ***19*** *who sets their heart on seeking God—the Lord, the God of their ancestors—even if they are not clean according to the rules of the sanctuary."* ***20*** *And the Lord heard Hezekiah and healed the people.*

There are also accounts where people respond directly to a warning of judgment, rather than another person interceding for them.

Example	Response	Outcome
Nineveh — Jonah 3:4–10	The people believe the warning, humble themselves, turn from violence and call urgently upon God.	God sees their changed conduct and relents from the announced disaster. Jonah 4 then exposes the prophet's resentment at that mercy.

Example	Response	Outcome
Ahab — 1 Kings 21:17–29	After Elijah announces judgment, Ahab humbles himself.	God postpones the announced disaster upon his house. This is a striking instance of God noticing humility even in a deeply compromised king.
Rehoboam and Judah's leaders — 2 Chronicles 12:5–8	They humble themselves and acknowledge that the Lord is righteous.	God grants a measure of deliverance, although subjection to Shishak remains.
Hezekiah and Jerusalem — 2 Chronicles 32:24–26	Hezekiah and Jerusalem's inhabitants humble themselves after his pride provokes divine wrath.	

For New Testament believers, these examples are particularly relevant:

Jesus prays for his executioners — Luke 23:34.
Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. He asks the Father to forgive them. This is a powerful expression of mercy towards perpetrators.

Stephen intercedes for those killing him — Acts 7:59–60.
While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." [60] Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

As he is being stoned, Stephen asks the Lord not to hold the sin against his attackers. The passage does not state that every attacker is thereby forgiven regardless of repentance, but it clearly shows the direction of Stephen's heart: he pleads for mercy while suffering injustice.

Paul prays for those who abandoned him — 2 Timothy 4:16.
At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. Paul says that everyone deserted him at his first defence and asks that it not be counted against them. This appears in the same chapter where Paul entrusts Alexander's repayment to the Lord. He exercises discernment rather than responding to every wrong in the same way.

2 Tim 4:14-15 [14] Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. [15] You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message.

Paul's different approach here could be due various factors. Perhaps it was due to Alexander's resistance of the advancement of the Gospel. Maybe he had discerned in Alexander an unrepentant spirit.

Believers are instructed to pray for a sinning brother or sister — 1 John 5:16–17.
If you see any brother or sister commit a sin that does not lead to death, you should pray and God will

give them life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that you should pray about that. ***17*** *All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.*

John describes prayer on behalf of someone committing sin that does not lead to death, while also acknowledging a serious limit involving sin that leads to death. The passage is difficult in its details, but it plainly establishes a place for restorative intercession when we see another believer sinning.
Total Apostasy and Denial of Christ: In the context of 1 John, the author was writing to counter early false teachers (often associated with early Gnosticism) who had willfully abandoned the church, denied that Jesus was the Son of God come in the flesh, and refused to love others. This "sin" is not a one-time mistake, but a deliberate, continuous, and unrepentant rejection of Jesus Christ.

Two further passages help explain the wider biblical pattern. Psalm 106:23 *So he said he would destroy them— had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him to keep his wrath from destroying them"*. This scripture looks back on Moses' intercession and describes him as standing in the breach before God to turn away destructive wrath. ***Ezekiel 22:30–31*** *So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD."*

This passage describes God seeking someone to stand in the gap for the land, but finding no one.