

Big Question 9: Does God punish evil?

**Sunday 06 March 2009
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Readings:

Exodus24: 12 – 18

Psalm 38: 1 -8

Mark 9: 42 – 48

Sermon

I used to work with a good friend who described himself as a 'lapsed catholic' and we had some interesting discussions on the bible in particular on the Old Testament.

His main issue with the OT was that the God of the OT was a vengeful one quite unlike the God of the NT who was very clearly a loving one. As a consequence, although he liked the Psalms, he thought the majority of the OT was made irrelevant by the New Testament.

So Brian perhaps that is another big question for future consideration: "Why is the God in the Old Testament so different to that in the New Testament?" However when you look into the Old and New Testaments in more detail you quickly realise that they are one and the same God for God, by His very nature, is unchangeable.

However it is easy to see how the perception of God in the OT being vengeful can arise when you come to passages such as today's reading from Exodus. God is yet again sending Moses to Pharaoh to persuade him to let the Israelites go, knowing that once more Pharaoh will refuse.

As a result God will send a final plague on Egypt, far worse than the previous ones. In this plague every firstborn son in Egypt will die along with every firstborn cattle, every Egyptian family from Pharaoh down to the lowest slave girl will be affected. But the plague will pass over all the Israelites, leaving them and their cattle unscathed.

This will be the plague that demonstrates God's might to Pharaoh and the Egyptians and convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. It does indeed appear to be a vengeful act but it is in fact God punishing Pharaoh for his persistent sin of abusing the Israelites as well as rejecting God's will.

Pharaoh and the Egyptian people were punished, and punished severely by God, through an act that affected every single Egyptian family – an act they would never forget.

This then appears to be a definitive answer to today's big question 'Does God punish evil? But we need to delve deeper into this issue and I think we need first of all to define what is meant by evil.

The Holman Bible Dictionary defines evil as 'That which is opposed to God and His purposes'. The New Unger's Bible Dictionary defines it as 'the failure of rational and free beings to conform in character and conduct to the will of God.'

In other words it is about resisting or defying or rebelling against the will of God – knowing what God wants or expects but refusing to comply, not once but over and over again.

I think one of the main reasons people have a problem with the idea of what we see as a loving God punishing evil is a failure to recognise God punishes us out of love, in the same way as a father disciplines his children – and the sole purpose of this 'punishment' or 'discipline' is to restore the relationship between ourselves and God.

We are all sinners but for those believing in Jesus, all our sins – past, present and future (for, yes, we will all continue to sin) – have already been punished. When Jesus was nailed to the cross our sins were nailed to the cross with him!

Jesus took our punishment on that cross and therefore as Christians we will never be punished for sin. That was done once and for all. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Because of Christ's sacrifice God sees only the righteousness of Christ when he looks at us and not our sins.

Prior to Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross for our sins, God had set up specific sacrifices for sinners to make atonement for their sins. But these sacrifices had to be made time after time, whereas Jesus' sacrifice was a 'once and for all' one.

The fact that we won't be punished does not mean we can carry on regardless and ignore our everyday sins secure in the knowledge that Jesus has already taken on himself the punishment due to us!

We will continue to sin throughout our lives because that is in our human nature but if we continue to act in sinful ways and we do not repent and turn from that sin, then, as a loving and concerned Father, God will discipline us.

God's discipline is always right and good for us because the sole purpose is to restore our relationship with him so that we can again share in his holiness.

However the consequences of our sinning may affect others so although we may only have to deal with God's discipline for our disobedience, we may also have to deal with the consequences resulting from our sin.

For example if, as a believer, we break the law of the land but repent then God will forgive us and cleanse us from the sin of that act. He will restore the fellowship we have with Him. However, the consequences of breaking the law of the land cannot be avoided and these may be severe, it may mean being fined or even spending time in prison.

These are natural consequences of sin and must be endured. But we may come out of this experience in a closer loving fellowship with God. Oscar Wilde said: "Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future".

There are many examples in the bible of God punishing people for their sins but then both forgiving and using them for his purposes. The first example is of course Adam and Eve told not to eat from the tree of life but doing so. As a consequence God punished them by banishing them from the Garden of Eden and condemning them and mankind to a life of toil.

David, the king chosen by God to replace Saul, sinned 'big time' first through adultery with Bathsheba and then compounding his sin by having her husband killed in battle. But when God sent his prophet Nathan to face David with his sins David was immediately repentant:

Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan replied, "The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt, the son born to you will die." 2 Samuel 12: 13 – 14.

David accepts the consequences of his sin and in the Psalm we read earlier (38: 1 – 8) David is pleading for God's leniency and at the end of the Psalm David utters this plea:

'O LORD, do not forsake me; be not far from me, O my God. Come quickly to help me, O Lord my Saviour.' Psalm 38: 21 -22.

Despite David's very serious sins he was totally reconciled to God and it was one of David's ancestral line that God chose to be his Son's earthly family when he sent his one and only Son to earth to be the ultimate sacrifice for our sins.

David was forgiven by God because he is a God of love - but David had to live with the consequences of his sin because God is also a God of justice.

David's punishment for his sins contrast to that of Pharaoh and the Egyptians for David acknowledged his repented and asked for forgiveness, whereas Pharaoh and the Egyptians did not repent. David faced life albeit with the consequences of his sin – the Egyptians faced death.

There are many other examples and not just in the OT! In our reading from Mark's gospel Jesus gives a stark warning of the consequences of un-repentant sin – it is not eternal life but hell!

In John 3: 16 we read:

"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life"

The clear message is believe or you will be punished, you will not inherit eternal life you will be condemned to hell.

Romans 6: 23:

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

In Hebrews 12: 5b – 6 we read:

"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

And in Hebrews 12: 9 – 10 we read:

"Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness."

There are many warnings in the NT of the consequences of not believing and doing God's will, in fact, Jesus talks more about hell than he does about heaven!!

But there are not just warnings in the NT for in Acts 5 there are frightening examples of God's punishment when first Ananias and then his wife Sapphira fall dead at Peter's feet for lying about the amount of money they had received from the sale of some property.

God loves all of mankind and as a consequence He shows His mercy by not immediately punishing people for their sins - he shows his love for the world by giving people the opportunity to repent.

But God does and will punish evil, for evil is a refusal to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour and there will be a final day of judgement! However God wants everyone to be saved but the choice is ours and ours alone – God waits patiently for us to acknowledge our sinfulness, to repent and ask for his forgiveness, and there is no sin too great for him to forgive if there is true repentance.

We can't pull the wool over God's eyes though - because the daunting or scary thing is that God knows our innermost thoughts – only he knows if we as sinners have the sort of repentant heart his love demands only God knows if someone is truly repentant and we are unable to judge or just as importantly to object!!

God cares for the perpetrators of evil deeds, a fact that many people find difficult to believe forgetting that God is a God of love and forgiveness. Look how he continued to use David despite his adultery and arranging a murder.

God does punish evil and we need to remember there is no kind of sin that cannot be forgiven. But this is something we tend to forget because we think in the secular way where wrongdoings are ranked and the consequent punishment needs to match the crime.

For example in 2002 when Myra Hindley, the moors murderer, died the tabloid newspapers carried headlines such as "Dead: but not forgiven"; and "At last Myra is where she belongs – hell".

These headlines clearly demonstrate the difference in worldly and heavenly views of forgiveness. Lord Longford spent many hours talking with Myra in prison and genuinely believed that she had repented for her part in the moors murders.

The media and general public were more sceptical and felt it was not sincere and that talk of repentance was merely a ploy to get out of prison early. But if Myra had truly confessed her sins (and only God knows that) and asked God for forgiveness then God would forgive her. In the same way that he forgives every single one of us if we are truly repentant.

God loves every one of us even though we are still sinners, we might not have committed evil deeds such as murder but nonetheless we are all sinners. We need to remember that in Jesus' teachings on the commandments he extended their scope to cover our thoughts as well as actions, e.g. with regards murder he said:

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment." Matthew 21: 21 - 22a.

Because God loves every one of us he continues to work miracles to set us free from our sins and he gives us ample time and warning to recognise our sins, to repent and ask his forgiveness. As a loving father he will discipline us for our sins with the express purpose of turning us back to the narrow path of salvation.

But there will come a time when, on the day of judgement, God judges everyone, a time when God will punish evil once and for all and when that time ultimately comes the punishment for the unrepentant will be exclusion from eternal life! And that headline the tabloid newspaper used at the death of Myra Hindley will be true for them "Dead but not forgiven"!