

Why Does God Punish People So Severely?  
February 9, 2012 – Tough Questions  
Tim Perry

I will not make God mad.  
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Did you ever get in trouble at school and have to spend the afternoon writing on the preverbal chalkboard? Well, when I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, me and a bunch of buddies thought it would be a cool thing to play a prank on our teacher, Miss Henry. We knew that Miss Henry always kept her attendance sheets right in the front drawer of her desk, so we decided to sneak down to the biology lab and grab a frog that ordinarily students would be dissecting. We pulled this icky, nasty frog out of the formaldehyde and snuck it up to our room and put it right on top of the attendance slips that Miss Henry would have to pull out of her drawer the next morning.

Well, you can guess what happened. The next morning, Miss Henry opens her drawer, freaks out and sooner or later she finds out that Tim Perry was involved in this scheme somehow. So I think for the rest of the afternoon, me and a couple of my buddies spent the time writing sentences about frogs on the chalkboard.

Well, this week in our Tough Question Series, we're going to ask the question that has to do with God's people and what happens when God's people get in trouble with God. This week in our Project 4:4 reading, the Israelites get in trouble three times with God in a major big way and God has to punish them and correct them.

So the question I want to ask as we take a look at these three colossal failures on the part of the Israelites is this:

Is it true that God saves his harshest punishment sometimes for his very own people and why does God do that? If God punishes even his own people, does he do the same today?

Let's take a look at what happens this week with the Israelites and their relationship with God (see whiteboard).

There are three really tough failures on the part of the Israelites. First of all, ten out of twelve of the spies that go in to check out the Promised Land come back and give a really bad report about the potential for living in that area. Two out of the twelve spies, Joshua and Caleb, believe that they can do it with God's help, but because of the report of these ten, the rest of the Israelite community remains defiant and faithless and defeated. They don't want to go in – they don't want to do what God has mapped out for them. So God waits it out with them. He says – not a one of this generation is going to go into the Promised Land – so instead of

that adult population being able to go into the Promised Land and to possess it, it would be their children that would go into Canaan and get to fulfill those promises.

A second really bad mistaken happens at the hands of a guy named Cora. Cora and some other men from the tribe of Reuben lead a rebellion against Moses. They question whether or not God's plan to have the Levites lead the nation of Israel spiritually is all that wise. And because of their rebellious attitude, 250 families of these men are swallowed alive by a small earthquake that opens up underneath their tents. The 250 men themselves are then consumed by God's glory as flames shoot out from the tabernacle and consume them in an act of judgment. Then the entire Israelite community comes to Moses. They're watching this unfold and they're saying, "Moses, what are you doing? You're leading us badly. You're responsible for all of these peoples' deaths!" They wrongfully accuse Moses of bringing all kinds of bad on their community and as a result 14,700 people die of a plaque that breaks out.

So what is this telling us? God is serious about sin. What does it mean about who God is and why is it that he punishes even his own people so harshly?

Well, let's look at two or three possibilities before we wrap up. Let's look at three very popular explanations as to why God does punish sin harshly.

First of all, it's often said that God punishes sin harshly because He is an angry God. Well, that's not quite right. God doesn't punish because of some character flaw on his part. He punishes because he is a Holy God. If we're looking for a character attribute that explains why God does what he does, it's because of his holiness. Not because he's short fused or he's angry.

We can see this not only in the Old Testament, but also in the New Testament. It's popularly said that God in the Old Testament is angry and God in the New Testament is compassionate. But you can see examples of God being both ways in both halves of our Bible, and we will as we continue to read through it. But the thing to bear in mind is that God has the reaction that he has to sin because he is holy.

Reason #2 that we often hear is that God punishes people because he hates sinners. And that's more of an emotional reaction on the part of a lot of people today – they just think that God is some angry individual in the sky and the focal point of his anger are people. He just hates sinners – when in fact what God really hates is not sinners, but sin. Because you see God alone has the best perspective on how dangerous and caustic sin is. Sin is so devastating that God has to take stern measures to steer us away from sin as a pattern in our character and in our choices. He goes to pain to warn us not to slip into sin. Not to dip into doing things our own way. But then he also goes to pains to create a way for sin to be atoned for – for sin to be dealt with – for sin to be forgiven. So it's interesting that so many of these painful failure that Israel is experiencing right now revolve around the priesthood

and around the tabernacle – the very things that God is giving them as a sign of his grace and of his will to forgive people.

Thirdly, it's often said that if God didn't punish people and get angry and show his strength that somehow they wouldn't fear him. But that couldn't be further from the truth. Actually, if God didn't punish people – is really not the best way to put it. Why don't we put it this way – if God didn't correct or discipline people, then God, in fact, wouldn't be acting in love towards them. If God didn't discipline people, he wouldn't love them. You can put that the other way around. If God didn't love people, then he wouldn't discipline them. So we would expect a God in the Old Testament who is acting in loving ways towards his people to actually correct, discipline, to bring judgment on things that are clear mistakes.

The New Testament in the book of Hebrews puts it this way. Hebrews 12:5-9 reads like this: *"And you have forgotten the word of encouragement that addresses you as sons (the author of the Hebrews said). My son do not make light of the Lord's discipline. Do not lose heart when he rebukes you because the Lord disciplines those he loves. And he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. Endure hardship as discipline. God is treating you as sons – for what son is not disciplined by his father. If you're not disciplined, and everyone is disciplined, then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the father of our spirits and live."*

So God is not just an angry vengeful God in the Old Testament, he acts in ways that are consistent with his holy character. And it may seem to us like some of the consequences are pretty steep for what the Israelites do, but it's actually out of an impulse to correct and love them and guide them as legitimate sons and daughters into what he has for them. God does what he does because he's holy and God does what he does because he is a God of love.

So if you disagree, give me a comment and we'll continue dialoguing about this. This has been Tim Perry for Tough Questions, Christ Community Church. Thanks for spending a few minutes with me.