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Q&A#90 Legal and Natural Consequences of Sin

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Today's question: "What is your understanding of the legal and natural consequences of sin? Should we separate the two? Is there any difference between God's judgement/wrath and the natural consequence of being handed over to sin/the powers?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what is your understanding of the legal and natural consequences of sin? Should we separate the two? Is there any difference between God's judgment, wrath, and the natural consequences of being handed over to sin or the powers? It might help to begin by considering something about sin more generally. Sin involves pollution and it also involves guilt.

So with respect to guilt, it involves our falling short of the obligations that we bear towards our Creator. It involves the responsibility and the culpability that come with that and a certain sort of legal consequence that results from that. That as a result of our guilt, we stand condemned and indicted before God and on the account of that condemnation, there is punishment.

But yet, when we talk about sin, there are also natural consequences and those natural consequences have a number of different characters. So for instance, if we're talking about suffering, if we're talking about death, if we're talking about these other things

within the world, a lot of these are natural consequences of sin. Sin brings its own rewards and we see a lot of this within the book of Proverbs, that there is a folly that the rod for the back of the fool is often oneself imposed.

The foolish person, the sinful person, brings their own punishment. If you spend your life in sin, you will discover that sin brings some pretty bitter fruit and the harvest of sin is a deeply painful one for many people. So those are natural consequences.

That's even apart from some divine imposition of punishment. This is something about the natural way that God has ordered the world. So there is a sense in which it is God bringing about a reward, but it is very much about the natural order of reality.

It's about natural law and the consequences of sin within that order, rather than something that's specifically imposed by God as a punishment extrinsic to the sin, a direct response to it in a retribitional fashion. But when we're talking about sin, we also need to remember that sin is pollution. Sin as pollution is that which prevents us from having access to God's presence.

Pollution needs to be dealt with. And so, for instance, in the sacrifices, you need to deal with the pollution of sin in the sin offering, and then you need to consecrate the person and set them apart for God's presence in the ascension offering, and then you need to have communion. And so there's a progression and it's dealing with different aspects of sin.

When we talk about the natural consequences of sin, we're also talking about things that are suffering within the world. We're talking about things like the death that exists within the world. It's interesting when God talks about the results of Adam's sin, he doesn't say, in the day that you eat of the tree, I will surely kill you, but you will surely die.

And I think there is a difference to be observed there, that the punishment or the consequence of the sin is one that is brought about in some sense by God, but it is one that follows a different logic than a purely retribitional form. Now, elsewhere in scripture, we read that the wages of sin are death. And so the wages of sin is death.

So there's a sense in which there is a degree of retribution there, paying back of what the action of the sinner has, the action of the sinner has paid back to them in the form of death. But when we think about death, death is in many respects a result of being removed from God's presence. And so it's not completely direct.

There is the removal from God's presence and as a consequence of that, there is death. And so I think that's a different thing from God directly killing Adam and Eve. Now, when we talk about God's wrath, God's wrath as we see it within the Old Testament is very much associated with God's presence coming near or going into God's presence and going into God's presence as a polluted and guilty person and God's wrath breaking out

and destroying.

And so when God comes to the land of Egypt, for instance, he comes to the land of Egypt and they need to protect themselves with the blood. They need to cover their houses with the blood on the lintels and the doorposts. And because there is this judgment that's coming near and God's presence, it's not safe to be in God's presence if you're unprepared.

And as we look through the Old Testament, I think we'll see things like much of the priestly system, much of the sacrificial order, much of the temple as a structure, things like the practice of circumcision. These are in many senses not just boundary markers marking out Israel's identity but a sort of protective hedge that enables people who are sinful to live in God's presence and yet not be destroyed. And so just before the destruction of Sodom, God gives the instruction concerning circumcision to cut off part of the flesh in order that the whole flesh might not be cut off.

And I think this is something that we see elsewhere, the cutting off of the flesh for circumcision in preparation for the Passover and the celebration of the Passover with the blood. And that's a protective hedge as God comes near to judge or the crossing over the Red Sea of the Jordan and then the association of the second great circumcision there. Now, elsewhere in scripture I think we see this logic worked out even further.

And so these natural consequences of sin can be internal to the sin itself, the way that folly reaps its own reward, its own punishment. It can be in the way that sin removes us from God's presence and God removes us from his presence on account of sin. It can be the way in which sin when it enters into God's near presence calls forth God's wrath upon us.

And that wrath is not just a matter of illegal punishment for something that we have done wrong. There is something more of almost an intense and explosive reaction against sin in the sense of pollution when it comes into God's presence. Sin needs to be covered and if it's not covered there will be this explosive reaction and the person will be destroyed.

And so wrath I think is slightly more than when we're talking about guilt. I think guilt is within a legal structure and it's the consequences of our condemnation and these sorts of things that lead to us being removed from God's presence. But it's not quite the same thing as wrath because wrath is what happens when God comes near.

Now, guilt can remove us from God's presence but wrath is what happens when our sinful, polluted presence comes into God's presence. And that I think is where the difference can be found. It's the collision between God's holiness and our pollution.

Now, when we're talking about the wrath of God that's about to be revealed that's

because God's presence is going to come in judgement and we are polluted people. We've been held out from God's presence because of our sin but God will come near and he will come near in judgement and so wrath will be revealed at that point and we can't escape from God. We can't just hold ourselves at a distance from God enjoying blessings from his hand but yet not suffering the consequence of being in his presence as sinful creatures.

God will flood the earth with his presence, with his glory and if we're not prepared we will be destroyed by that. When we're talking about the natural consequences of sin we're also talking about things like the consequences of our action even when we're forgiven. When we're forgiven by God we are allowed into his presence again.

Our relationship with him is restored and our sin is covered and dealt with but yet we still suffer the natural consequences of sin. If we have betrayed people for instance there's no reason why we should be immediately put forth in positions of responsibility again. There is a consequence of what we have done and the fact that God has forgiven us does not mean that the consequences of our sin in that sense are removed.

Rather we are no longer condemned and removed from God's presence as a result of that. We are once more allowed into God's presence and that also means that there should be relationships restored with our neighbours but that does not mean that we have trust again in the full sense, that we can restore what we have broken. There are consequences in that sense.

There are also natural consequences because of the existence of sin in the world, suffering and things like the ways in which we suffer other people's sin. Sin has consequences that reach far beyond the original person. Our sin has consequences for the people around us.

In our sins of omission and our sins of commission, our sins of omission can also lead to a failure of charity towards others as those sins of omission create their own further sins of omission and as we invest our time in sin we are not investing our time and our labours and our efforts in things that are of benefit to our neighbour. Putting these things together I think there is a significant difference to be drawn between natural consequences of sin and legal consequences of sin and those things can be broken down further. So there are legal consequences in terms of specifically imposed punishment.

When we're talking in terms of the punishment of exile from God's presence that punishment comes with certain natural consequences. It's like saying that the consequences of if you've been someone who's been abusive within a particular situation in the house and you're put outside and you're on the street, the consequences of the cold is not directly imposed upon you by the person who cut you out, removed you from the house. Rather it was a consequence of your abusive character in collision with the nature of the house as a place that was supposed to be a place of safety and

security and so you were removed from the house and one of the natural consequences of that is you're left out in the cold.

Now when we're talking about God there is a sense in which the natural consequences of our sin involve things like death, involve things like the fact that all the things that come from being cut off from the source of life, from being cut off from God, the consequences of that and condemnation and the way that we're alienated from God's presence all have these natural consequences and then sin itself creates its consequences even apart from the collision with God so that's a further aspect of natural consequences. There's the unravelling of the natural order and its goodness as a result of sin since Adam and so those are a further set of natural consequences. Then there are the consequences of the sins of other people around us, the way that we are hurt by other people's sins.

When we're talking about the legal consequences of sin that relates primarily to our relationship with God, it relates to either the condemnation that we lie under, the way that we are removed from God's presence and can no longer have access to him or it relates to those things that are forms of judgement that are consequent on breaking of covenant relationship. Now I think it's important to recognise the difference between the covenant order and in some sense the creation order. The creation order is that which establishes this realm of relationship with God.

When we are removed from the presence of God there is a certain sense in which we suffer the consequence of de-creation. Now that's not just merely a legal consequence, that's a consequence of the way things unravel when we remove from the sphere of our creator, when we reject our creator. The good created order starts to break down and we suffer the bitter consequences of that.

It's painful and we suffer in many forms of suffering as a result of that, whether that's illness, whether it's something like the bitterness of the fruits of sin, all these things as the created order unravels. Those are a result of a de-creative effect. We can lose access to the fruit of life.

So that's the de-creative effects of sin but alongside that we have the legal effects which relate to the covenant order, the covenant that has been broken or the covenant that has been not just entirely broken but there has been some violation within it. So I think that's a helpful distinction to draw that within the covenant order there can be something that someone does wrong that does not entail itself a de-creation and a breaking down of the covenant order. Rather there are certain sins that can be dealt with appropriately within the covenant order that do not entail the breaking down of that and the exile from God's presence.

So if we look through the sacrificial system there are many ways in which we have sin being dealt with through the different offerings and sacrifices that exist within that system and enable people to exist in God's presence as sinful people and have that sin

dealt with. The problem is that that covenant can be broken in a categorical sense and then you're exiled from God's presence and God's wrath spits you out of the land. So that distinction I think is important.

The wrath is related to the incompatibility of people that do not have their sin dealt with existing in the presence of a holy God whereas the legal consequences can often exist within a structure that provides for dealing with those and so as a result of the sin that we commit there can be a certain sacrifice that is given for instance. Now within the New Testament our sins can be dealt with and forgiven and the legal consequences can be dealt with in a way that enable us to live in the presence of a holy God and yet still be people that have sin in our lives. There are still natural consequences though.

Those natural consequences that we might lose fellowship with others, we might lose the trust of others, we might suffer the bitter fruits that sin yields in our own lives, we might suffer from the effects of the fall more generally as we suffer natural disaster, as we suffer the futility and the struggle of our labour, as we suffer the sin of other people around us. In all these different ways we can suffer the effects of sin but we are no longer exiled from God's presence. We can be in God's presence now in a way that we could not be before.

So I think that maybe breaks down some of the difference between wrath and judgment. That does not mean that as Christians we can't suffer God's judgment in different ways. There is a certain sort of disciplinary judgment, much as the judgment that exists between a parent and their child.

And that judgment between parent and child is not a breaking down of the parent-child relationship, a de-creation of the family order with that child being thrust outside of the home and exiled from the family presence. No, it's something that enables that order to be retained but is designed to arrest its moving to its full conclusion. Because if that goes to its full conclusion it will lead to exile, if that streak of rebelliousness is not halted, is not dealt with.

And so in the same way God disciplines us for our good so that we might not be exiled from his presence. So there's a certain sort of judgment there that is not the same as the more absolute form of wrath that is dealt out in context where the covenant has been decisively broken and it breaks down and there is a de-creation and people are spat out from God's presence. Putting all of this together I think that it helps us to understand some of the differences between God's wrath coming out on people and God's judgment upon his people in a way that maintains the covenant order and does not lead to the breaking of the covenant and exile from his presence.

It helps us to understand I think some of what it means to be forgiven people and yet still deal with sin and the consequences of sin. That we can be in God's presence, we can be those who are forgiven and yet still suffer consequences. God can also bring

consequences upon our sin as can others when they've been forgiven.

We can be forgiven by people, the relationship can be restored in some ways, there can be no condemnation, there can be no opposition and antagonism that there once was but yet there remain consequences. If someone has deeply betrayed you again that does not mean that when you forgive them you have to put them in a position of great trust again. That trust can be won over time and restored but that is something that requires a process of restoration and a process of a renewed form of life, repentance that's demonstrated and trust that's once more proved.

The consequences of sin in that case remain but the consequence is no longer that of that relationship being absolutely broken and being alienated from each other. There is a restoration of fellowship but that fellowship needs to be restored to its full extent and in the same way with God we have our fellowship restored with him but there are still consequences of our sin. We still know distance from God when we are sinful, when we are spending time dallying with our sins we no longer have the access and the intimacy with God that we should enjoy and so there are consequences of our sin even when we are forgiven and so in the same way as a child that can experience a certain degree of alienation from their parents when they are living in a way that's in opposition to them within the household God punishes us for our good that he might restore us to his presence.

We feel the bitter fruit of our sin, we feel the consequence of his punishment of our sin, we feel the challenge of his judgments upon our sins and the words that he says to us that condemn us and call us to repentance in order that we might be made whole, in order that that relationship might be restored and this is not the same thing as the more categorical wrath that comes out upon people. We are judged in this way in order that we might be spared from his wrath, that we might remain in his presence, that we might be blessed but that we might know the fullness of fellowship with him and not be alienated and cut off in various ways because of our sin and its natural consequences in our lives. If you have any further questions please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

If you would like to support this and future videos please do so using my Patreon account. Tomorrow will be my last day doing these videos for a number of weeks. When I come back I'm going to be taking a number of your suggestions on board and changing the way that I go about these.

If you have any further suggestions please leave them in my Curious Cat account, in the comments on my blog or send them to me by email and also when I reach my 100th question and answer video I want to have a bumper question and answer session and answer a lot of short questions. So if you have any questions for that please send them along now and in the next few weeks I will get a list of them, of a dozen or so and try and

answer them all in one big video. Thank you very much for your time.

Hope this was of some help and Lord willing see you again tomorrow. God bless.