

Death: A Punishment Inflicted by God or a Natural Consequence of Sin?

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The Bible says:

“For the **wages of sin is death**, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”
(Romans 6:23 NIV84, emphasis mine).

“The one who sows to please his sinful nature, **from that nature will reap destruction**”
(Galatians 6:8 NIV84, emphasis mine).

“**Sin**, when it is full-grown, **gives birth to death**” (James 1:15 NIV84, emphasis mine).

These texts seem to make it clear that death is the direct result of sin, not an infliction by God, and the Bible says elsewhere that the power of death is Satan’s power, not God’s:

“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy **him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil**” (Hebrews 2:14 NIV84, emphasis mine).

Based on these texts, I recently called out an article published in the December 7, 2023, *Adventist Review* for stating the following:

To spare us, God poured out His wrath against the violation of His law (sin), not on the violators of His law (sinners) but on the sinless Jesus, the only way that God could “be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26). **In short, rather than killing us for violating His law, the Father killed Jesus instead. ... Or, to put it crudely, the Father killed Jesus so that He wouldn’t have to kill us** (Goldstein, C. “Law, Freedom, Love.” [Adventist Review](#) online edition, Dec 8, 2023, emphasis mine).

I asserted that the author is attributing to God the power of death, which the Bible says is actually a power of Satan. In other words, the author is describing God as using Satan’s power. I also observed that putting God in the role of death-bringer is the unavoidable result of people accepting the lie that God’s law functions like human law—a system of made-up rules that require external enforcement. When people believe God’s law is imposed like our laws are, they *always* conclude that justice means inflicting punishment and that the minimum punishment for sin is death, so they conclude God must inflict death to achieve justice. Furthermore, because Jesus came to be our substitutionary Savior, they teach that God killed the innocent Jesus in our place. It is very sad to see this, but this is what [the one single lie](#) about God’s law does.

Understanding Difficult Passages

If I am correct, that the power of death is the devil’s power and that God does not inflict death as punishment for sin, then what do we do with texts like this one?

“See now that I myself am He! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand” (Deuteronomy 32:39 NIV84).

Is the Bible contradicting itself? Does God use Satan’s power? Is God the source of life and death? Is death inflicted by God? Am I wrong about the *Review* article?

How we understand the Bible and all theological questions is directly *determined* by our understanding of how God’s law functions. If we believe that God’s law functions like human laws, imposed rules that require legal oversight and enforcement, then we conclude, like the *Review* article does, that God is the source of inflicted death as punishment for sin—and we will cite texts like Deuteronomy 32:39 to “prove” this false conclusion as true.

But when we return to design law, understanding that God is Creator and all His laws are the protocols

that He built reality and life to operate upon—like the laws of physics, health, and the moral laws—then we realize that God is not the source of death, but that death is the result of breaking away from God and His design protocols for life, like breaking the law of respiration by tying a plastic bag over one's head.

Then what do we do with Deuteronomy 32:39? We cannot ignore this text, so how do we understand it?

As we do with all Scripture, we place it in the setting of the entire inspired record, the setting of the Great Controversy, and we do not form our understanding only on one text. And with just a little more Bible searching, we find this clarifying text:

“The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up” (1 Samuel 2:6 NIV84).

In this passage, we can see the answer through Hebrew parallelism, in which the second phrase expands upon the first—and what do we learn? That God is in control of what the Bible calls the first death, not the second death; that God causes the first death but not the second death and that He will raise people from the first-death experience.

The Bible and Death

In Scripture, the word “death” is applied to two different and distinct states of being:

- The first death, which the Bible describes as a “sleep” (Matthew 9:23,24; John 11:11-14; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17), is a state of being in which the body ceases to function and decays back to dust (Genesis 3:19), but the soul, the individuality, “sleeps” awaiting the resurrection. It's like a computer whose battery “dies” so the computer “sleeps” until it is powered up again. The great Reformer Martin Luther wrote, “It is enough for us to know that souls do not leave their bodies to be threatened by the torments and punishments of hell, but enter a prepared bedchamber in which they sleep in peace” (Weimarer Ausgabe, 43, 360, 21-23 (to Genesis 25:7-10); also Exegetica opera latina, Vol 5-6 1833 p. 120 and the English translation: Luther's Works, American Edition, 55 vols. (St. Louis: CPH), 4:313).

The first death is not the end of life; it is a pause in one's life—the life will continue at the resurrection.

- The second death is the death that is the “wages of sin” death (Romans 6:23); it is the death in which both body and soul are destroyed. This death does not happen to anyone until *after* the judgment—after the second resurrection at the end of the 1,000 years. This is the death that occurs when one is completely and permanently cut off from God, who is the source of life. And the second death has no power over the righteous, only the wicked (Revelation 2:11; 20:6).

Understanding these two types of death allows us to understand Deuteronomy 32:39 and 1 Samuel 2:6 and how the devil, not God, holds the power of death.

God is the source of the first death—the sleep-death, which is an artificial state of suspended animation instigated and caused by God's grace to limit the destructiveness of sin and to allow time for the plan of

salvation to be carried out. If not for God's grace in suspending for a time the ultimate consequences of sin (second death), there would be no first death, only the second death. But the Bible tells us that God in "his forbearance had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished" (Romans 3:25 NIV84). God intervened to create this artificial state of sleep-death so that Jesus' mission to come and overcome as our substitutionary Savior could be accomplished.

Thus, the Bible rightly tells us that God is in control of the sleep-death, and it is God's power to bring this sleep-death and to awaken people from it. But the sleep-death is not the death that is the wages of sin! The death that is the wages of sin is the death that Satan causes—and which Jesus came to destroy:

"The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:26 NIV84).

"Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10 NIV84).

So, we have two deaths described in Scripture. The first death, the sleep-death, which is not death at all but a period of suspended animation in which a person awaits resurrection, is the artificial state of grace controlled by God for the purpose of saving humanity from sin.

But the second death, eternal death, which is a state of annihilation and from which there is no resurrection, is not from God—it is the result of unremedied sin and is the fruit of Satan's power to alienate people from God, the source of life.

And the second death occurs not when God uses power to inflict it, but when He stops using His power to prevent it. In other words, God has been using power to hold at bay what sin does, but in the final end, God "lets go" and surrenders the persistently rebellious to reap the full consequences of what they have insisted upon, separation from Him, the source of life, and they die eternally. Just as Galatians says: "The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction" (6:8 NIV84).

God is the source of life; Satan and sin are the source of death!

Delaying the Mission

We will not be able to complete our mission of taking the gospel to the world as long as we present a god who is the source of death inflicted upon people as punishment for sin. We must reject the lie that God's law is imposed like human law. And we must reject the penal/legal theologies that place God in the role of cosmic executioner who wields Satan's power of death.

Instead, we must return to worshiping God as Creator, the source of life, the healer of our souls, the one who made the heavens, earth, seas, and fountains of water and who sustains all its operations.

I invite you to reject the penal-substitutionary fraud, which is based on the lie that God's law functions like human law, and worship God in His true light as Creator, Healer, Savior, and Sustainer of all reality—the God whose laws are design laws.

