

Did God Kill David's Baby?

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | June 3, 2011



Dr. Jennings,

*I came across a statement... in the book *Patriarchs and Prophets*, page 722, "**The sentence of death was transferred from David to the child of his sin.**" I found this statement most disturbing in the light of the fact that I believe that God does not punish; and he does not punish the innocence for the guilty. Additionally, I don't understand the transference of the sin of a parent to his or her child. Can you shed some light on this statement?*

GB

Thanks for another great question. Let's read the quotation with a little more context:

Though there would be found none in Israel to execute the sentence of death upon the anointed of the Lord, David trembled, lest, guilty and unforgiven, he should be cut down by the swift judgment of God. But the message was sent him by the prophet, "The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die." Yet justice must be maintained. The sentence of death was transferred from David to the child of his sin. Thus the king was given opportunity for repentance; while to him the suffering and death of the child, as a part of his punishment, was far more bitter than his own death could have been. The prophet said,

“Because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die.” — Patriarchs and Prop[hets, pg 722.2

Wow, on the surface this appears a very troubling passage because one could misconstrue the problem with sin to be an offended governing authority, which inflicts penalties, and in this case the governing authority, instead of inflicting the penalty upon the guilty, executed an innocent baby for the crimes of the father.

But, as with everything we read, including the Bible, we must ask not only what was said, but what does it mean. Language can easily be misconstrued to connote erroneous ideas. This is especially true if we read passages in isolation or come to the text with preconceived ideas.

You were right to be repulsed by the idea that the child was executed for the sin of David. Does anyone really believe it is just to kill an innocent baby for the sin of the father? The Bible certainly doesn't:

The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him. Ezekiel 18:20

If the passage from Patriarchs and Prophets contains spiritual truth it could only have come from the Holy Spirit for spiritual things are spiritually discerned (1Cor 2:14,15). The Holy Spirit will not contradict Himself and since the Bible tells us that sin and guilt are not transferred from father to son, we know that the troubling quotation cannot mean God transferred guilt, sin, and punishment from David to his baby. Unless one claims Patriarchs and Prophets supersedes the Bible, which of course we would never do.

So whatever the meaning of the passage, if it is from the Holy Spirit, it cannot mean God is punishing the child for the sin of the father. So what is going on? The context reveals that the author of the passage is elaborating on the mindset of King David and those who lived at that time in Earth's history. At that time in Earth's history people attributed to God that which God allowed, but did not directly cause. An example of this would be the death of King Saul, who was king prior to David. King Saul committed suicide and the Bible faithfully records this, but the Bible also describes Saul's suicide as God killing him:

Saul said to his armor-bearer, “Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me.” But his armor-bearer was terrified and would not do it; so Saul took his own sword and fell on it. When the armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he too fell on his sword and died with him. So Saul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and all his men died together that same day. 1Sam 31:4-6

Saul died because he was unfaithful to the Lord; he did not keep the word of the Lord and even consulted a medium for guidance, and did not inquire of the Lord. So the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse. 1Chron 10:13,14.

Now, did God actually put Saul to death? Was an angel sent from heaven to force Saul down on his sword against his will, or did Saul choose to end his own life? Then why does the Bible say “the Lord put him to death?” Because at this time in the Bible God is described as doing what He permits.

Because the Christian author in the commentary you have quoted is elaborating on David’s experience and mindset, she is utilizing the same principle the Bible uses and which was commonly understood at that time in human history of ascribing to God that which He permits.

But who actually pronounced the “sentence of death” for the crime? King David did when he answered Nathan as to what should happen to the sheep owner who slaughtered the servant’s only ewe lamb (2Sam 12:5). It was King David’s understanding of what justice looked like that caused a sentence of death to be pronounced.

We are not told what actually caused the infant’s death, only that the infant died and God did not intervene to stop this death, despite David’s prayers. The pronouncement of the prophet that the child would die was an announcement of what God foreknew would transpire, a prediction of future events. It was not a judicial finding with subsequent execution by God. It did not mean God would kill the child or cause the child’s death, but rather that God knew the child would die and God would not intervene to miraculously save the child. Why didn’t God choose to save the infant?

It was the “judgment” of God! Given the circumstances, it was God’s “judgment” that this was the most redemptive action for all involved. To intervene and save the child would give an artificial validation to sin and suggest that sin is without consequence. To allow the child to fall into the death of sleep brought home to David the reality of sin’s deadliness.

God as the great architect of life is constantly at work diagnosing (making judgments) about what is wrong and providing interventions designed to heal and restore. In the Bible these interventions are often called judgments of God, designed to bring people to repentance, not to punish and harm.

He [Elijah] fully believed that God would humble apostate Israel, and that through judgments they would be brought to repentance. — Prophets and Kings, pg 122.

God “judged” (determined) that allowing the infant son of David to sleep in death would be the most therapeutic event for this situation to bring conviction to David and for those alive at that time, and serve as a reminder to mankind down through history that one cannot break the design template for life (God’s law) without deadly consequence. And, in fact, David was brought to repentance and saved from his sin, while the infant had no sin of its own from which to repent. The infant “fell asleep” into the first death from which resurrection occurs. We are told that on resurrection morning babies will be brought to their mother’s arms. There is no reason to believe this infant will not rise in the resurrection of the righteous to be raised by Bathsheba in a world without sin.

Thus God evaluated a situation in which sin (selfishness) had infected his creature (David’s heart,

mind, and character), resulting in violations of love (adultery, murder), with subsequent infestation into the hearts of others (Absalom, etc.) and threatened to spread further and cause more pain and suffering. God therefore sent the prophet to confront David in love. David pronounces a judgment of death. God permits the child of David's sin to die the death of sleep, from which the child will rise again and live eternally in a world free of sin, but this "judgment" brought David to conviction and repentance, so that David's heart was changed and he too will be eternally saved.

Finally, the "warning" associated with the loss of the child taught the lesson that violations of God's law causes pain, suffering, and death, protecting all those who hear the story from repeating David's folly.