

The Flood and the Question of Whether God Kills - Part 1

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | December 11, 2019



Recently, I have received emails from people who are passionate to present God in the most accurate and loving way possible. They have voiced strong objection to my position that God used His power in Old Testament times to put people in the grave for the purpose of keeping open the avenue for the Messiah.

They say that such a teaching contradicts the idea that love doesn't work by force — and that to make God responsible for killing people presents Him as severe, cruel, and the source of death, which is contrary to His character of love.

I want to thank them for writing me, and I firmly support their objection to any message that presents God as the source of death, as a killer, or as the cause of pain and suffering. However, I do believe several key facts have been confused, causing those who emailed me to misunderstand what I am saying.

So, let's examine the question.

Two Deaths

The point of biggest concern is when the Bible describes God as killing people. It isn't a contradiction when God acts to discipline; people understand that love disciplines. But many genuinely struggle to understand what is happening when the Bible describes God as causing people's deaths.

Many who promote God's character of love take the position that God would never use His power to cause death — that death only and always comes from breaking God's law and from beings who are sinful; i.e., Satan and evil people.

And they are *absolutely right!*

The confusion occurs because the Bible has two definitions for "death" — a *human* definition and a *divine* one.

The human definition for death is what all of us call death and what we have grieved when our loved ones have died. This, however, is not what God calls death. God, including Jesus when He was on earth, did not refer to this cessation of life as death, but called this state a "sleep." (Psalm 13:3; Daniel 12:2; Matthew 27:52; John 11:11-14; Acts 7:60, 13:36; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:6, 51; 2Peter 3:4)

In fact, Jesus said that those who believe in Him will never die — millions sleep in the grave, but they don't die (John 11:26). This "sleep death," what we call death, is also known as the "first death," the death from which *there is a resurrection*.

What God calls death is the "second death," the eternal death, the death from which *there is no resurrection* (Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8). It is this second death that is the wages of sin. The second death has no power over those who have been saved by Christ.

The first question to answer in understanding God's role in human death is: How many people in history have died the second death — the death from which there is no resurrection? None! If none have died, then how can we say that God kills? We say it because we apply the *human* definition for death and, thus, we misrepresent God as killing, even though God does not kill. God is the source of life, and death does not come out from Him.

So, I agree that God does not kill (cause the second death). No history demonstrates God causing a second death because *no one has yet died the second death*.

The question that next arises is: Does God ever put people to sleep (first death)?

One Error, Two Misunderstandings

Failing to differentiate the first death from the second death causes opposing errors, but both are still errors:

1. On the one side, people err in merging the first and second deaths while teaching God does kill; here, God is portrayed as the source of inflicted pain, suffering, and death upon those who disobey.
2. On the other side, those who have come to know God's character of love and have rightly rejected the idea that God is the source of death, but have *also* not made the distinction between the first death of sleep and the second death of annihilation (which is what God calls death), fall into the opposite error that God has never used His power to put people into sleep mode, the first death.

This is where one must move away from claims, statements, and proclamations to actual historical evidence. When it comes to the first death, sleep death, there are many causes. For instance, there are natural causes — disease and old age with no specific person inflicting it; the body just wears out. There are also accidents — falls, injuries, again without a specific infliction of death, just the result of our bodies being subject to damage and death.

But there are many examples in Scripture of the first death being brought about not by natural causes, but by other means. Let's examine some of these:

- Sometimes in Scripture, Satan acts to cause harm or the first death and it is attributed to God: "The fire of God fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!" (Job 1:16 NIV84).
- Sometimes evil people do the killing and it is attributed to God: "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" (1 Chronicles 10:13, 14 NIV84).
- Sometimes, God acted and it was rightly attributed to Him: For instance, when platoons came to arrest Elijah:

Elijah answered the captain, "If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!" Then fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men.

At this the king sent to Elijah another captain with his fifty men. The captain said to him, "Man of God, this is what the king says, 'Come down at once!'"

"If I am a man of God," Elijah replied, "may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!" Then the fire of God fell from heaven and consumed him and his fifty men.

So the king sent a third captain with his fifty men. This third captain went up and fell on his knees before Elijah. "Man of God," he begged, "please have respect for my life and the lives of these fifty men, your servants! See, fire has fallen from heaven and consumed the first two captains and all their men. But now have respect for my life!"

The angel of the Lord said to Elijah, "Go down with him; do not be afraid of him." So Elijah got up and went down with him to the king (2 Kings 1:10-15 NIV84).

- At other times, the first death was God removing His protection and allowing nature or the natural consequences of others to take their course, such as the scorpions and snakes in the desert or when the Babylonians took His people as captives.

So, the first step to correctly diagnose what is happening is to understand the difference between the first and second deaths. With this understanding, we can confidently say that God has never killed anyone and is not the source of death. Rather, God has put people to sleep — the first death.

If we accept this premise, we can conclude that in some of the Bible stories, God did directly put people in the grave (first death of sleep). Next, we need an explanation as to why and what these actions say about God and His character.

The Need for “Sleep”

Those who realize that God is not the source of death yet have incorrectly merged the first and second deaths make the error of teaching that whenever the death of sleep is inflicted in the Bible, it is done so by Satan or his agents whenever God removes His restraining hand — or when nature unravels as God removes His hand from the laws of nature due to human rebellion; the global flood is often explained this way.

However, I reject the view that God has ever relied on Satan to act for Him.

As in the story of Elijah mentioned above, it is not reasonable to believe that Satan — after years of trying to silence Elijah in order to have Baal worship totally eradicate the truth about God — would destroy the platoons sent by Ahab to arrest Elijah. It is also unreasonable to suggest that God would rely upon Satan to endorse Elijah as a man of God by sending fire from heaven when Elijah called upon it as proof that he spoke for God.

I also reject the view that God was punishing people for sin, as punishment for sin is eternal death; and since these were all sleep deaths they cannot be the punishment for sin.

Therefore, we must have another explanation — and that explanation is found in understanding the larger context: the great controversy, God’s design law, and what God was actually working to accomplish. In other words, how reality works. In this context, we discover that God has always been working to heal and to save.

Once Adam sinned, the human race could not be saved without Jesus coming. The Messiah was promised in Genesis chapter 3 when the serpent was told that Eve’s seed would crush his head. Thus, the Old Testament points directly to the larger battle between good and evil, with God working to bring the Messiah, while Satan would be working to obstruct it.

If Satan could have gotten every person on earth to harden their heart against God, there would have been no one through whom Jesus could be born in order to save the human race. God would not have Jesus born to a woman like Jezebel or force any woman against her will to be the mother of Jesus. Thus, God needed a righteous woman who would be willing to be the mother of Jesus. At the time of the flood, there was only one righteous man and his family left on the earth. All the others living on earth at that time had hardened their hearts. Wouldn’t love act to keep open an avenue for Messiah in order to save the species? Remember, not kill — rather, put people to sleep and wake them up later to finish out their lives. This is exactly what love did.

No Other Choice

Those who emailed me rejected the idea that Satan was working to close the avenue for the Messiah while God was working to keep it open. They said they could find no Scripture or other Bible commentators who ever suggested this idea. But this idea is not new. It is the entire tenor of the Bible — the coming Messiah. A founder of the Adventist Church wrote:

By leading Israel to this daring insult and blasphemy to Jehovah, Satan had planned to cause their ruin. Since they had proved themselves to be so utterly degraded, so lost to all sense of the privileges and blessings that God had offered them, and to their own solemn and repeated pledges of loyalty, the Lord would, he believed, divorce them from Himself and devote them to destruction. **Thus would be secured the extinction of the seed of Abraham, that seed of**

promise that was to preserve the knowledge of the living God, and through whom He was to come — the true Seed, that was to conquer Satan. The great rebel had planned to destroy Israel, and thus thwart the purposes of God. But again he was defeated. Sinful as they were, the people of Israel were not destroyed. While those who stubbornly ranged themselves on the side of Satan were cut off, the people, humbled and repentant, were mercifully pardoned. The history of this sin was to stand as a perpetual testimony to the guilt and punishment of idolatry, and the justice and long-suffering mercy of God (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 335).

But, despite this, the following was argued in one email:

Thus to rely on the argument that God was compelled to “put to sleep,” often through violence, millions of evil people at the flood or at other times in order to prevent Satan from snuffing out possibility of the Messiah landing on earth, is to agree with Satan that love is not really enough to overcome evil so there must be times when force has to be used.

I hope that you can see how desperately this person wants to make God look good, how sincere this person is. But there is one major piece of data missing from their assessment — the condition of humankind after Adam sinned. After Adam sinned, love *could not win* without Jesus. *Once Adam sinned, love could NOT overcome evil in human beings WITHOUT Jesus.* In fact, Jesus was the means for God to restore His character of love into the human species.

The entire focus of Scripture is the battle between Christ and Satan. In Old Testament times, this conflict was focused around Satan’s attempt to prevent Jesus from being born as a human while God worked to keep that avenue open for the Messiah.

Again, the same Adventist Church founder wrote:

Because man fallen could not overcome Satan with his human strength, Christ came from the royal courts of heaven to help him with His human and divine strength combined (*Confrontation*, p. 45),

From eternal ages it was God’s purpose that every created being, from the bright and holy seraph to man, should be a temple for the indwelling of the Creator. **Because of sin, humanity ceased to be a temple for God.** Darkened and defiled by evil, the heart of man no longer revealed the glory of the Divine One. **But by the incarnation of the Son of God, the purpose of Heaven is fulfilled. God dwells in humanity,** and through saving grace the heart of man becomes again His temple (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 161).

And this brings to light another truth: *Once there is brokenness, there are no pain-free options.*

If a person breaks a bone, there are no pain-free options — the only options are to heal or not heal. This is true for any injury, illness, or break in God’s design laws. Once humankind sinned, no pain-free options existed. Doctors often need to take healing actions that *increase* the experience of pain. They will reduce dislocated joints; they will surgically excise cancers; they will amputate gangrenous limbs; they will quarantine those who are infectious and contagious; they will put people to “sleep” with anesthesia and wake them up later; they will induce comas; etc. But all these actions are done in order to heal and save. This is exactly how God acts — all actions are to heal and to save.

Those who don't understand design law, who don't understand the actual condition of human beings in sin, who don't understand the difference between the first and second deaths, will err by teaching either that God is the source of inflicted death to punish sin, or that God never acts therapeutically to heal, which in the moment may result in greater pain, and at other times result in the sleep-death for those who would obstruct His plan to save the species.

In summary:

- The first death is sleep and *is not* the death that is the wages of sin.
- The second death is annihilation and *is* the death that is the wages of sin.
- No one has died the second death; thus, God has killed no one.
- God has put many to sleep in order to keep open the avenue for Messiah.
- But God will wake them up again to finish out their lives by their own choices. (For more explanation of this concept, watch [Answering Difficult Bible Questions](#), starting at 9:22 in our *'From Fear to Friends: God And Your Church'* seminar.)
- Salvation is only possible because of what Jesus accomplished.
- God, in love, has always acted therapeutically to heal and restore — like a doctor bringing remedy.

So be encouraged that our God is love, that His laws are the protocols upon which reality is built to operate, that He is not the source of pain, suffering, or death — and that God is actively engaged in eradicating sin — all deviations from His design, in order to heal and to save.