

SIN AND CONSEQUENCES
Proverbs 19:16, Ecclesiastes 9:11, Galatians 6:7
By Raymond White

Does sin have consequences or does it not? We like to think that it does, that good people are always protected against bad stuff and bad people sooner or later get their come-uppence. But is that true in real life? For that matter, is it even true in the Bible? What does the Bible say? Truthfully, the Bible is mixed.

[1] OPTIMISM

When Job lost everything and got sick, he received some questionable advice from his questionable friend Eliphaz.

Job 4:1 Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said, :7 Remember, I pray thee, who ever perished, being innocent? Or where were the righteous cut off? :8 Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same.

This advice that Eliphaz gave to Job is what we wish were true, the age-old optimistic view that good people don't suffer, and only bad people suffer. And so, reasons Eliphaz, that since Job is suffering, then Job must have done something bad, something that made God mad.

The old questions about sin and consequences persist. Does sin cause suffering or not? Do innocent people suffer or are they spared? And when the innocent suffer, why? And when the guilty are spared to live rich happy lives, why?

This optimistic view is spread across the Bible. Indeed, it is a primary message of the Bible that if you live right, God is on your side and you will be blessed, protected, and have a happy life. Here are just a few verses that promote that optimistic idea.

Proverbs 19:3 The foolishness of a man perverteth his way: and his heart fretteth against the LORD.

Bad people not only do bad things, but when faced with the consequences, they cry foul and blame the consequences on God. "It's no fair that God did this to me," refusing to accept that more likely they did it to themselves.

The quintessential God blamer was Cain. After Cain killed his brother, God cursed him. And Cain's response to that was **Genesis 4:13** *My punishment is more than I can bear.* In other words, this is too tough, God, and you're not fair.

So maybe it is true that bad people always get their just dues.

Proverbs 19:16 He that keepeth the commandment keepeth his own soul; but he that despiseth his ways shall die.

That's pretty clear. Obey God and you will live. Disobey and you will die.

Jeremiah 20:4 I will make thee a terror to thyself.

God makes the sinner his own worst enemy, a terror to himself. We see that time and time again as convicted felons, finally released from prison, reoffend, or druggies after becoming “clean” just can’t stay away from the substance that is destroying them. Who hurts them? They hurt themselves.

Ezekiel 18:30 ...repent...so that iniquity shall not be your ruin.

Repenting from destructive behavior stops destructive consequences, or as Ezekiel says, “ruin.” This is not a looking at ruin in an afterlife but ruin in this life. It is immediate consequences that repentance is expected to avoid.

[2] PESSIMISM

But there is a flip side to that coin. The reality is that consequences of sin reach beyond the sinner and harm other people, innocent people. If sinful behavior doesn’t harm innocent people, then why call it sin? The characteristic of sin, all sin, is injury, either to the sinner or to someone else. And it’s the someone else that’s in view here.

Naham 3:19 ...upon whom hath not thy wickedness passed continually?

Like the widening ripples from a stone tossed in a pond, sin reaches out to harm more and more people.

Sin is contagious. Like cold germs, sin expands to create more victims and more sinners. Some sins ripple through the whole world, like abortion which claims the lives of over a million babies a year in America alone, and millions more across the world.

The problem with sin is that its consequences are not isolated, not contained, but grow without bounds.

Sin always injures somebody. That’s what makes sin sin. If there is no injury, God would have no complaint. And if that injury is directed at the sinner, for instance a smoker gets lung cancer, then at least we wouldn’t fret over injustice — the sinner, we would say, brought it upon himself, so fair enough. But when the consequence target someone else, some innocent person, for instance a child gets lung cancer from her smoking mother’s second hand smoke, then that’s unfair.

So, the idea that sinners suffer and good people don’t is simply naïve; even absurd for the simple reason than when a sinner sins, someone gets hurt, and that someone, the victim, is the good person that suffered a consequence for someone else’s sin — which, by the way, is what law is all about. The reason why God began the Bible with codified law was to use punishment to deter injustice. That’s what law is.

Does law work? Yes, it works — usually, or often enough anyway to allow civilization to be civil, when it wants to be. Civilization doesn’t always want to be civil. Rome had laws but they also had gladiator contests and threw Christians to lions. We have laws but we also have abortion on demand. So law has its limits; there is still a lot of unjust suffering.

But suffering at the hands of some sinner’s misdeeds (actual injustice) is not the only innocent suffering. Anyone who has ever visited a children’s ward in a hospital

knows the suffering of the innocent caused by so-called “act-of-God,” which simply means that there is no sinner, no criminal we can blame. A three-year-old dies of cancer. Who do we blame for that? No one. There’s no one to arrest, no one to throw in jail, no one vent our rage on. The cancer just happened, it was just bad luck, an “act-of-God.”

We can blame God, but that makes no sense. That child had three years of life anyway, much of it joyful, and God didn’t have to do that. That three years was a free gift from God. We are all living on borrowed time. And whether we have a lot of it (100 years?) or a little of it (1 year?), that we lived at all was a blessing of infinite worth, and we’ll take it gladly, however long or short it is. So, who is to blame for an early death? No one. Certainly not God. Life happens, and death happens.

Does that mean that everything that the Bible says about good living producing a good life is wrong? No. It just means it is not absolute. My wife’s best friend died young of lung cancer. She never smoked, never abused her body, she lived right in every way. Then why the cancer? Just bad luck, that’s all.

Well, that sure sounds fatalistic, doesn’t it? Not necessarily. While it is not true that living right absolutely avoids every bad thing, it is true that living right *more likely* avoids *most* bad things. In other words, living right tilts the odds in your favor.

How much do the odds get tilted in our favor? By enough to cause God to forbid certain things (“Thou shall not kill”) and demand other things (“Love thy neighbor”). While obedience to God does not guarantee a favorable outcome in every instance, it does create more goodness for more people than we would otherwise have. That’s why God gave us commandments and why we obey them, because life is better for us all.

Let’s review that last verse.

Naham 3:19 ...upon whom hath not thy wickedness passed continually?

Yes, wickedness travels like ripples in a pond, but so does righteousness. Good people pass on goodness — to their children, to their friends, to society as a whole. And goodness makes the world, not a little better but a lot better. Simply stated, it is a better bet to be good, not merely because we might win, but because we do win.

[3] BAD THINGS, GOOD CONSEQUENCES

But fate has even another surprise for us. When bad things happen, sometimes good things happen as a result. The word “bastard” in its literal meaning has fallen out of favor. And rightly so. When a baby is born without a legal father, it is true that life will be more challenging for that child than if the father was in the home. But that little life is still a blessing to the world, and has as much right to live, and has as much right to life’s opportunities as anyone else.

Viewed that way, we’re less likely to condemn the single mother for her sexual mistake. Yes, it may have been a sin; that is, she “missed the mark” (which is what “sin” means), but in missing one target, she hit another: she began a little life, and what that little life eventually becomes, we just have to wait and see, just as we would with any other little life.

Jesus died — that’s bad. But from his death came salvation — that’s good.

No one likes stinky manure, but from it sweet roses grow.

[4] REALISM

So, where do we find a balance? In Proverbs and elsewhere in the Bible we read that good living results in a good life. But in real life we see that ain't necessarily so. But it is *usually* so, and *usually* gives us enough reason to live right lives. But still, there is a tittering balance and the Bible recognizes that.

Ecclesiastes 9:11 I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to the man of understanding, nor yet favour to the men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all. :12 For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in the evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them.

So, while Proverbs optimistically declares that good living causes good life, Ecclesiastes pessimistically declares maybe not.

What's the truth? Both are true. But how can both be true when they are a contradiction? Because life is a contradiction. And the best advice that anyone can give is found at the end of that wonderfully contrary book.

Ecclesiastes 12:13 Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. :14 For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

God will bring every work into judgment? Oh really? We can hope, but how is that to happen? Yes, living right tilts the odds to right living people, but there are still losers, and that there should be any young losers at all, including abortion victims, makes the universe seem disinterested in our notions of justice and fair play. For the final resolution to that universal dilemma, the Bible author of Ecclesiastes would have to wait another thousand years.

[5] FINALLY

Our expectation that God will somehow make everything all right can only be realized in an afterlife. The best that a murder victim can expect here is justice, and justice, while it deters more criminal behavior and reduces the number of victims, does not bring the dead victim back to life. The best that a child that dies of cancer can expect is that the medical profession will find a cure for cancer so that no more children have to die that way. But still, we want something better. We want God to undo all the bad stuff and make it all go away — for good people anyway and certainly children.

There is one hope for that happening, and that hope is Jesus Christ, the man who died, and returned from the dead, and promised all of us who believe in him an everlasting life of joy without sorrow regardless of the sorrows fate has meted out to us in this life. The reason we believe his wild and wonderful promise is because he really did

resurrect. Anyone who has the power to do that surely must have that power to do all the rest of it. And on that single event of history — the dead man got up — we hang all our hopes for the future. There is nothing else to hang them on.

Whenever a child dies we ask, “How could a loving God let this happen?” My answer to that question is this:

First: We can speculate, but in the end, his reasons are his own. I believe that God has a higher plan for all of us that prevents him from micro-managing. In order to bring us to our ultimate purpose, he has to let go. He has to allow the quantum fizz to fizz. That’s my opinion, but that’s just me.

Second: That God gave life at all is such a blessing that it cannot be mitigated by an early death. No matter what, that we were born at all proves that God is a god of love with our best interest at heart.

Third: In spite of the terrors of this life, God has promised us a next life filled with joy and free of tragedy. Why would anyone want to accuse the God who promises to do all that? In spite of the myriad tragedies of this life, we ought not to accuse God of anything and give him credit for everything, even the short lived life of a child.

My wife had a baby that died an hour before birth. We didn’t have him for five years, or one year, or even one minute. But I knew as I held that little bleeding body in my arms that one day he will be ours again.

It is a foolish thing that some people do when they write off God because he does things or allows things they don’t like. God is the one person in all the universe that has the power and the willingness to bring families back together again in an eternal life of joy. He is on our side — really. So trust him, and be happy — and, of course, live a right life because, after all, there are consequences.

[6] CONSEQUENCES

Matthew 6:3 doest alms :4 in secret and thy Father ... shall reward thee openly.

Matthew 6:14 if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will forgive you.

Matthew 7:1 Judge not, that ye be not judged.

Matthew 10:32 Who shall confess me before men, him will I confess before my Father.

Matthew 12:36 Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof.

Matthew 19:16 what shall I do that I may have eternal life? :17 keep the commandments.

Matthew 25:33 And he shall the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on his left.

Luke 10:27 Love God and thy neighbor, :28 this do, and thou shalt live.

John 5:29 they that have done good unto...life, and that have done evil unto damnation.

1 Corinthians 6:9 the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God, be not deceived.

1 Corinthians 15:2 ye are saved if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you.

2 Corinthians 5:9 we labour that we may be accepted of him.

Galatians 5:21 they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

Galatians 6:7 whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

Ephesians 5:5 no whoremonger nor covetous man hath any inheritance in the kingdom...

Philippians 2:12 work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

Colossians 3:24 ye shall receive the reward of inheritance for ye serve the Lord Christ

1 Timothy 4:16 continue...in doing this thou shalt save thyself and them that hear thee.

2 Timothy 2:12 if we deny him, he also will deny us.

Titus 1:16 They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him.
Hebrews 3:13 exhort...lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.
Hebrews 5:9 he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him.
Hebrews 10:36 after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.
James 1:12 Blessed ... that endureth temptation for he shall receive the crown of life.
James 1:22 Be doers of the word and not hearers only deceiving your own selves.
1 John 2:3 And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.
1 John 2:24 Let that therefore abide in you...:25 this is the promise...even eternal life.
Revelation 20:12 the dead were judged out of those books according to their works.