

Why does God seem so cruel in the Old Testament?

From Nadine:

A colleague at work said he doesn't want to follow a God as cruel as ours. He referred to Genesis 17:14 and severe judgment on those Jews who refused to circumcise their children. Why not apply a more reasonable punishment than being "cut off" from the people? How do I answer him?

Dear Nadine,

What a challenging question! It connects with many serious issues and therefore my answers may leave some stones unturned. Though complete answers may not exist, we can take a stab at some partial ones.

If you don't mind, I would prefer to write this in the form of a letter to your colleague. You need not show it to him unless you think it advisable.

Dear sir,

Your concern is understandable from the viewpoint of one acquainted with elements of the Old Testament but less acquainted with the gospel.

I am surprised you picked this one example of apparent divine cruelty. Far more drastic judgments exist in the Old Testament. This is one of the mildest I can think of. But since you brought it up, I will touch on it.

Circumcision in the Bible was a symbol of an important and central spiritual reality; repentance from sin and a change of heart to follow the Lord with a commitment to purity of life. The prophet Jeremiah said, *Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts*, Jer 4:4.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul explained, *...circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. Romans 2:29*

Thus, circumcision symbolized the injunction to repent for being a sinner in order to receive forgiveness and acceptance with God as his children. Rejection of circumcision therefore represented a refusal to repent, submit to God's authority and subsequent forfeiture of mercy.

Scholars are not clear as to what is meant by "cut off from his people." Some think it means put to death; others, exile.

I am now going to say the reverse of what you may expect. Regardless of whether the punishment is exile or death, such punishment is nowhere near severe enough to fit the crime. What does a person with an uncircumcised heart deserve?

That person deserves to be stripped naked, his back lacerated with whips, his head abused so the scalp is torn and blood runs down his face because such injuries bleed a lot, so he scarcely sees what is being done to him. Then dragged to a piece of wood and nailed to it by his hands and feet so no matter what movement he makes, it is agony; then left there for hours, to die a slow death by asphyxiation, blood loss and pain.

How is that for cruelty? The definition you presented of imprisonment or death is paltry by comparison.

The God of the Bible has a standard and it is absolute, universal and unchanging, defined in one word, repeated often as, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty."

God is infinitely holy and we are made in his image. What then should he expect of us? Absolute holiness, of course. Logically, anything less deserves punishment of the most severe sort.

Could God do to somebody what I describe above and be just? In view of his infinite holiness, yes! In fact, he chose a substitute to suffer that in our place.

Who did he choose? A prophet? Maybe a man with a high pain threshold? Let's think carefully about what I am going to say ...

HE CHOSE HIMSELF!

The apostle Paul put it this way:

*...in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself... For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
2Cor 5:19,21*

*but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
...we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, Romans 5:9,10*

He did that for you and me.

Our uncircumcised hearts deserve hell. Between us and judgment is a barrier, a cross stained with blood. We can stop there and abandon our shallow reasonings, our own self-righteousness, our idols and false gods including ourselves and be washed clean. Or we can skirt around the cross and continue on our way to God's justice.

Let's take a look at the word "cruel." Behind this word is the assumption that the punishment far exceeds the value of the crime. It transcends the term "severe" and leads

to an accusation of malice, insensitivity and disregard for balance in the application of justice.

This supposes we have discovered a standard of right and wrong superior to God's and he is in error to impose it. Therefore, when we accuse God of injustice, we must do so very carefully and be sure our reasoning is justifiable.

The Third of the Ten Commandments says, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." (Exodus 20:7) One way we do that is by accusing God of injustice. The text adds, "for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain." This means, "I will punish those who do that." Curiously, this is the only one of the Ten with an overt threat attached, so it must be important.

A fatal flaw is hidden in the basic objection. From what do we derive a standard by which to judge God? Is it something from surrounding norms? Or is it merely what "seems" right? If it is the latter, then we must ask, "why should we take what *seems* right to be authority for judging anything?" Is this rational or merely emotional?

We have all broken this third commandment and deserve the punishment he poured out on his Son as our substitute. We are all lawbreakers relative to God's absolute holiness and deserve his justice.

Permit me to suggest you rethink your presuppositions in view of the cross and consider imploring God's mercy.

I pray the true God may guide you in your pursuit of truth.

Roger Smalling