

Dr. Jack L. Arnold
Biblical Suffering

Suffering Because of Sin

Lesson 5 THE SIN UNTO DEATH 1 John 5:16-17

A young couple on staff of Campus Crusade for Christ, who had previously been members of my church, had great zeal for Christ and was moving up in his ministry. After about 3 years he started to become indifferent to Christ and also to his wife. He then committed adultery and started to drink alcohol heavily. His wife forgave him, but he had to leave the ministry and couldn't keep a job. Finally his wife persuaded him to come and see me for counseling. After several counseling sessions I concluded that he was hardened to spiritual truth even though he claimed to be a Christian. Finally I told him that if he didn't repent I believed God would kill him and showed him 1 John 5:16-17. He laughed at me and never returned to see me. About 6 months later, after he had left his wife and involved himself in all kinds of sins, he got drunk and passed out on his couch with a cigarette in his hand. The couch caught fire and he burned to death. An accident? I think not. In my opinion, this was a clear case of the sin unto death.

God disciplines His children because He is a loving Heavenly Father and desires His people to be holy. God is jealous for the spiritual condition of His people, and He desires for them to conform to Christ in their experience. Often God's discipline for a child of God is very severe, even resulting in physical death for the Christian. This is the most extreme form of discipline and it is called "the sin unto death."

DEFINITION OF THE SIN UNTO DEATH: The sin unto death is a sovereign act of God whereby He takes the Christian out of this world by physical death because of the Christian's continual refusal to heed God's discipline and yield to the Holy Spirit to walk a holy life.

HOW TO INTERPRET THE SIN UNTO DEATH

"There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that." 1 John 5:16b.

Just about all scholars of the Bible agree that there is physical death for rebellious Christians, but all do not agree as to whether "the sin unto death" is referring to physical death. Some think it refers to spiritual death.

Mortal Sin. This view is held by Roman Catholics. To them, the sin unto death is some specific sin so terrible as to be unforgivable, such as suicide, murder or idolatry, resulting in the loss of salvation.

Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit. This is probably the most common view among evangelicals. To them, the sin unto death relates to spiritual death, not physical death, and is associated with apostasy. An apostate is someone who has made a profession of faith in Christ but begins to drift away and ultimately comes to the place where he actually blasphemes the Holy Spirit and the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is taught in the Bible, but it is questionable whether it is taught in 1 John 5:16.

Physical Death for a Rebellious Christian. This view, which is my interpretation, is also quite common among evangelicals. To them, a Christian may become very rebellious and bitter in his Christian life. A Christian who repeatedly walks according to the flesh has lost his usefulness to the Lord on this earth and God must discipline him. The most extreme discipline that God can bring to a Christian is physical death. The Christian is saved, but his reward in heaven will be very little.

Once a person is truly saved, he can never be lost, but if he becomes a rebellious Christian, God will discipline him. If there is no repentance and change of life towards Christ, then God has the remove the believer by physical death. Saved—but useless. What a pitiful condition to be in!

A SIN NOT UNTO DEATH

“If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death . . . All wrong doing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.” 1 John 5:16a-17.

We must see 1 John 5:16-17 in context and the context is about prayer ***“This is the assurance we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.”*** (1 John 5:14-15). Verses 16-17 are an illustration of a request that is in the will of God, as contrasted with one that is not in the will of God. The sin “that does not lead to death” is the kind which permits a concerned brother to ask God for deliverance from that sin for an erring brother, and the will of God is to grant that request. The “sin which leads to death” is the kind to which God has already determined His course of action and no prayer is going to change His mind. Therefore, it is useless to pray because this prayer will not move God.

Verse 16a must be taken with verse 17 which says, ***“All wrong doing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.”*** All wrong doing is sin but there is sin with a certain characteristic that leads to physical death. Sin which is not unto death arises out of ignorance. It is a sin where someone is simply doing something which he may have only vague idea is wrong, but he has no understanding of the implications of it and no awareness of how bad it is.

If you see your brother committing that kind of a sin, ask God, and God will give life for those whose sin will not lead to death. God will withhold the discipline of physical death and grant opportunity for the renewal of life.

King David was heavily disciplined by God for his affair with Bathsheba and the death of Uriah, her husband. Apparently he expected to die by physical death, for the penalty for both murder and adultery in the Old Testament was physical death. David repented and God removed the threat of death but he suffered severely all his life for that sin. How familiar are the words of 2 Samuel 12:13: ***“Then David said to Nathan. ‘I have sinned against the LORD.’ Nathan replied, ‘The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die.’”***

A SIN UNTO DEATH

“There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that” (1 John 5:16b).

Sin that leads to death is physical death for a rebellious Christian. What is the element that turns ordinary sin into the sin unto death? It is persistence in a determined course of action when one knows that God has said it is wrong.

The Bible has many examples of men and women who were disciplined with the sin unto death. This sin was for some specific sin God had very clearly shown to the rebellious Christian but the Christian refused to obey.

Lying to the Holy Spirit. In Acts 5, there is the record of Ananias and Sapphira who were punished with the sin unto death because they lied to the Holy Spirit. This husband and wife sold some land and held back part of the money for themselves, not giving it to the Lord’s work. The sin was not that they held back some money, but that they lied about it. God struck them both dead.

Necromancy. The main wicked act that King Saul did was that of necromancy, which is the attempt to contact the spirits of the dead, a practice thoroughly forbidden by 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 Chron. 10:13-14). The passage in Chronicles says God killed Saul, but the means God used to bring this sin unto death was Saul’s own suicide. ***“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” (I Sam. 31:3-4).

I had a very close friend who committed suicide. He was a preacher of the true gospel but had some emotional instability. He went through a serious church split and most people say this is why he took his life. I have a different interpretation.

For ten years this young man was a brilliant evangelical with an outstanding life. He would debate liberals and win them for the cause of Christ. At one point in his life, he became more interested in extreme conservative politics than the preaching of the gospel. During this time, he began to associate with a group of Christians that stressed Christian liberty, and he picked up the habit of drinking alcohol. His father was an alcoholic and he knew he might have the tendencies himself. He began to drink for pleasure and then it became an everyday occurrence. He could consume more alcohol than anyone I ever knew without showing many outward signs of drunkenness. But it soon became apparent he had a serious drinking problem.

I counseled him against the use of alcohol and he laughed at me, calling me a Christian legalist. Whenever he would get depressed, he would go to alcohol rather than God. Finally I said to him, “If you continue this lifestyle, God is going to kill you.” As time went on this brilliant young pastor, with a lovely wife and four children, was driven to the point of insanity. At 35 years of age, in a drunken stupor, he crawled into the attic of his church and put a bullet through his head, causing instant death. An accident? I think not. This was punishment from God for his alcoholic lifestyle.

Partaking of the Lord’s Table in an Unworthy Manner. In 1 Corinthians 11, we have recorded that many of the Corinthians were taking the Lord’s Table lightly and were coming to it with known, unconfessed sin. They were being selfish about the Lord’s Table and some were even drunk when partaking (1 Cor. 11:21-22). In this act, they were inviting God’s discipline (1 Cor. 11:29). The result was that some were weak physically and suffering disease and some were actually dead ***“That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.”*** (1 Cor. 11:30). The words “fallen asleep” indicate death. Perhaps some of the physical weakness that is apparent among Christians today may arise from this very cause. Not all physical weakness comes from abusing the Lord’s Table, not all premature deaths arise from this, but some very likely do.

Unbelief. According to the Books of Deuteronomy and Numbers, a whole generation of Israelites perished in the wilderness and no doubt many of those that perished were believers, but rebellious towards God (Num. 14:29; Deut. 1:39).

Disobedience by Leadership. According to Numbers 20, God commanded Moses to speak to the rock, and when he did this water would flow from the rock. Moses became irritated with the children of Israel and lost his temper. In anger, he struck the rock. God gave the water to Israel but He severely disciplined Moses for his disobedience. Moses was forbidden to take the children of Israel into the Promised Land, and he was left to die on Mount Nebo.

It is a serious thing for a person in spiritual leadership to disobey God. Think long and hard before you want to be a leader of God’s people ***“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly”*** (James 3:1).

I had another good friend who was from a Christian home and was probably saved sometime in college. He was an active witness, led people to Christ and went off to seminary. Then he began to drift away from the Lord. He left school and went out into the secular world to become a lawyer. He became quite immoral, living with women, drinking heavily and involving himself in all kinds of immorality. Yet, through all this, he still called himself a Christian and even witnessed once in a while. I said to him, “If you don’t change your lifestyle, God is going to kill you.” He married an unsaved woman and became a successful lawyer. He had everything including his own airplane, which was a bi-wing stunt plane. He loved to do stunt flying and was an expert at it. His plane had just gone through a complete overhaul and was in perfect shape. One day he did a loop and the plane crashed to the ground. A young man of 29 years of age was dead. An accident? I think not! I’m convinced this was the discipline of God upon this rebellious young man. God was

Longsuffering but He did not forget. This man was a bigger hindrance to God than a help on this earth so God took him out of the world by physical death.

THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS AND THE SIN UNTO DEATH

How Can the Sin Unto Death be Harmonized with Progressive Sanctification? Progressive sanctification deals with God's work in making a person more holy in his experience, but the sin unto death deals with man's responsibility to seek holiness and to do God's will. If a Christian chooses rebellion, then he must suffer the consequences. Furthermore, sin unto death deals with some specific sin when there is clear knowledge about it. It is therefore not the result of a state of sin, but some specific act of sin, done in bold rebellion to God.

Why Don't We See More Physical Death for Sin in Our Day? There are many people who we might call carnal Christians who have never ever been born of God's Spirit. They live in a constant state of sin because they have not been saved.

Certainly we know God is a God of grace and is longsuffering with His children. God puts up with a lot before He brings maximum discipline of physical death.

There may be many cases of physical death for believers because of sin but we would not always visibly recognize it as such.

Lastly physical death is the result of certain knowable, rebellious acts of sin, rather than a result of a state of sin.

WARNING TO CHRISTIANS

Christian, if you choose to play sin games with God you may well experience the sin unto death. One can only test God so long and then He will bring severe discipline. It is not beyond God's right or power to bring the sin unto death to any rebellious Christian.

The sin unto death comes when one has transgressed a clear, knowable law of God. This sin is not done out of ignorance, but out of willful rebellion. If God is convicting your heart about some sin, get this right with God immediately, for you might be in line for the sin unto death.

With much light comes much responsibility. Those who have much light can expect the greater discipline from God.

Do you realize, Christian friend, that you are to reflect the character of God to the world about you? If you have a willful determination to disgrace God in the eyes of others, God will say, "All right, that's enough. You are useless to me on the earth. I can't trust you anymore. Come on home." And home you go! However there will not be a very happy homecoming in heaven, for the Lord will not be able to say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."