

One of the most unpopular topics in Christianity is the theme of divine punishment. Every denomination has its own take on the topic. Martin Luther believed that before the fall of Adam, God willed all to be saved. After the fall of Adam, Luther taught that God predestined some for heaven and predestined most of humanity to hell. In contrast to Luther, John Calvin wanted to protect the omniscience of God, and therefore taught that even before the fall of Adam, God had already predestined some for heaven and most for hell. In contrast to the writings of Luther and Calvin, the Catholic Church teaches that even after the fall of Adam God still predestined all of humanity for heaven. The problem: sinfulness gets in the way. Sin can be a fundamental choice of opposition to God. Hell then, can be understood as the soul's fundamental decision to be eternally separated from God.

Talk of divine punishment is unpopular especially when we start pondering whether some of our suffering and woes in this life may be the result of divine punishment. This is a dangerous topic because it can be misused. The Book of Genesis attributes the human condition, inclination to sin, suffering and death itself as the result of God's punishment of Adam and Eve. The Book of Genesis also attributes the division between cultures, nations and races to God's punishment upon the people of Babel. In Noah's day, we can't forget the wrath of the Flood to wipe out the human race with the exception of those on the Ark. In Exodus, God punishes the Hebrews for their infidelity by forcing them to walk through the desert for forty years prior to entering the Promised Land. The Babylonian Exile was divine punishment for the infidelity of Israel. God tells Jonah to travel by land in one direction, Jonah travels instead by sea in the opposite direction. The result? Big ol' fish comes and swallows him and, after three days, spits him out back onto land in the direction God wanted him to go in the first place. What do we find in the New Testament? Jesus warns of people being cast out on the last day, wailing and grinding their teeth. In Corinthians, St. Paul tells the people that some of them are sick and dying because of their sinful behavior. The Bible ends with the Book of Revelation's final judgment and the end of the world. Divine punishment is pretty central throughout Scripture. What are we to make of this? I think people have a hard time dealing with divine punishment because; first of all, it's unpleasant to think about; secondly, it seems conflicted with the God of love revealed in Jesus; and finally, divine punishment can be abused, as if our physical maladies or personal tragedies are due to God punishing us. God's punishment is best understood as God disciplining us, as a parent would discipline his or her child. If parents didn't discipline their children but let them run wild without consequence, we would call them bad parents. Divine punishment ought not to be understood as God hating us somehow. Divine punishment, properly understood, is a function of God's love for us. Scripture refers to God like a mother or a father reproving His children. Does God discipline us, make us feel the consequences of our sinfulness, so that we might change our sinful ways and return to Him? Yes!

Is Protestant reformer Martin Luther right in saying that after the fall God predestined most for hell? No. Is Protestant reformer John Calvin right in saying even before the fall God predestined most for hell? No. Catholic teaching: God wills all to be saved. Sin, however, gets in the way. So, let me leave you with a question. If everything in this life is a preparation for eternal life, can we see some of our sufferings and pains as God's way of allowing us to feel the results of our sinfulness, so that we might turn around and take the narrow road to the joy God has prepared for us?