

Unchanging God
February 28, 2016

I want to deal with a question this morning that some of you have asked from time to time. Or you may have heard others ask a form of this question and wondered how to answer.

The question can be stated various ways. Here are a few:

- Why is God so different in the Old Testament than He is in the New Testament?
- Why is the God of the Old Testament angry all the time and the God of the New Testament loving?
- How can I reconcile the God of the Old Testament,... who destroys nations of people,... with Jesus of the New Testament,... who offers mercy and love?

No matter what form you put the question in, it is based on false information. It is not true that God is different in the two parts of the Bible. God's character is consistent throughout the Bible. If you see God only as angry in the Old Testament, you have missed the many passages that speak of His love and compassion for all people. And if you see only God's love and mercy in the New Testament, you have missed the many passages that speak of the coming wrath of the judge of all the earth.

To start this morning, let me first explain the basic difference between God's anger and man's anger. Man's anger is a normal human emotion. Like all our emotions, we do not often choose anger. It is one of those emotions that often sweeps over us uninvited. Someone acts against us and our natural reaction is anger. And often we react with words or actions that express the intensity of our feeling. Too often we do this without thinking first about how to respond to the other person. When this happens we speak of people losing their temper, flying off the handle, hitting the roof, blow a gasket, go ballistic, have a conniption, and dozens of other figures of speech that mean the same thing.

That is NOT the way God expresses anger. God never loses His temper or acts without thinking about what to say or do. The reason we do this, but God doesn't has to do with knowledge.

We, but not God, are surprised into anger. When someone does something against us, we are surprised. This is new information. This new information triggers anger in us. We are shocked at this new thing in our lives. We are shocked that someone would do such a thing to us. Maybe another car cut you off, suddenly endangering your life. Your sudden fear triggers anger. Maybe someone insults you, and that triggers anger. Maybe you realize someone stole something of yours and that triggers anger. Maybe your child shows disrespect to a teacher and that triggers anger in you. You are suddenly surprised and shocked by this new information.

But God never learns new information. God already knows everything that will happen. God never suddenly learns of someone's sin against Him. God is never surprised by some new sin. God knows all the sins that will be committed. He knows what sin, by whom committed, where, when, and why they will be committed. God already knows it all. Therefore, God is never surprised into anger. Nor is God shocked by sin. God already knows exactly how evil the human heart can be. Nothing we do shocks God. It saddens Him. It goes on the list of sins against us. But it does not surprise or shock God when we sin against Him.

Since God knows everything, God has had an eternity to think of a proper response to every sin. His response is often to wait. His response is often to wait and teach us of our sin so that we can seek His forgiveness. But if we consistently rebel against God, He may bring violent and painful judgment upon us. It is totally within the authority of the judge of all the world to do so. When you read of anyone in the Bible experiencing suffering or death at the hands of God, know for a certainty that they fully deserved it. And likely, you or I would have put an end to them much sooner than God did.

We're going to look at several passages this morning. But this first is the most important for us. In this passage God is speaking to Moses. Moses does not know much about the god, Yahweh. If you are not familiar with the name Yahweh, it is God's personal name. The word "god" is a generic term for any deity. We often use the word god when speaking of our God because we believe there is only one god in the universe. But God is not His name. Yahweh is His name, the name by which He introduced Himself to Moses early in the book of Exodus.

Moses knows the name of Yahweh, but not the character of Yahweh. So Yahweh tells Moses what He, Yahweh, is like.

Exodus 34:6-7 (HCSB) Then the LORD (Yahweh) passed in front of him (Moses) and proclaimed: Yahweh—Yahweh is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in faithful love and truth, maintaining faithful love to a thousand [generations], forgiving wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin. But He will not leave [the guilty] unpunished...

God speaks of both His anger and His love. Which one is emphasized more? His love is emphasized more. God's love is shown repeatedly throughout the Old Testament. God is compassionate towards all people. He faithfully loved the Israelites, fulfilling His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God guided them, protected them, and prospered them.

Yahweh also describes His anger. What does He say? He tells Moses that He is slow to anger. He does not quickly become angry. He does not lash out without thinking first. Elsewhere we learn that God is longsuffering. God is patient. God gives people time to change their sinful behavior towards Him.

But note also that God, as the just judge of all the earth, will not hold off forever on punishing the guilty of sin. God acts to judge sin. God judges people guilty of sin and carries out their sentence, even a death sentence. But God never does so thoughtlessly. God never executes capital punishment without careful consideration.

In every Old Testament instance of God putting someone to death, the person or persons deserved it. The judge of all the earth judged them guilty and condemned them to death. God used various means of execution in the Bible. God used flood, famine, illness, snakes, an angel of death, and war.

Let's look at two of the instances most often cited by those who claim God is hateful and angry in the Old Testament. The first takes place in the book of Joshua. It began a little over 40 years earlier when God rescued the Israelites from Egypt. For 40 years God marched them across the desert, but eventually brought them to the land of Canaan and said, go and take over the land from the Canaanites. Kill everyone, men, women, and children. On the surface, that

seems unfair. But a more careful reading of the Bible will reveal that God was bringing judicial judgment upon an extremely sinful nation. God did so after giving them plenty of warning and time to repent. We know that God told Abraham about 600 years earlier that this was going to happen. When Abraham was alive Canaan was already a pretty sinful place. And yet God waited another 600 years to bring them to their end. God is slow to anger.

The second example often cited from the Old Testament is the death of Uzzah. You may remember the event. King David was having the Ark of the Covenant moved to the capital city of Jerusalem. The Ark was being carried on a cart. One of the oxen stumbled, the cart started to tip, and a man named Uzzah reached out to steady the Ark from falling off the cart. But it was a sin to touch the Ark and God struck him dead. Everyone knew it was a sin to touch the Ark. Even though his motives were not sinful, his action was.

God always acted justly when He put people to death. But as I said, the love of God is more emphasized and seen in the Old Testament. God was much more patient with the Israelites than any of us would have been. God gave them chance after chance after chance to turn back to Him before He brought judgment upon their nation. He punished them by allowing the destruction of His own temple and the exile of many of His people into a foreign land.

But look what one of their own prophets wrote about the love of God from that foreign land. Daniel, the prophet, can look back on 1000 years of Israel's history, since the time of Moses, and see how God, indeed, had been faithful in His love of Israel. He has not been like a permissive parent, but neither has He been a strict disciplinarian.

Daniel 9:4-6 (NIV) I prayed to the LORD (Yahweh) my God and confessed: "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.

Those prophets had warned Israel, over and over and over, to repent of their sin and turn back to their God or face His anger. Look at this example from the prophet Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 33:11 (NIV) Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD (Yahweh), I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?'

So there is ample evidence of God's compassion, graciousness, faithful love, and mercy in the Old Testament. The judgments are more dramatic. But the love of God is there if you will look for it.

Of course, we are very familiar with God's love in the New Testament. The most dramatic statement of His love is this one.

John 3:16 (NIV) "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

That statement was backed up with the actual death of Jesus on the cross for our sins. God sent Jesus to die for the sins of all people. Everyone who hears the Good News of salvation in Jesus can choose to be saved from their sins.

And that same compassion and mercy God has shown everyone He calls His followers to live out also. I preached a couple of weeks ago about His command to love our enemies and what that means.

But if all you see of God in the New Testament is His love, you have not read the New Testament very well. For there is a continual warning throughout the New Testament that all people must repent of sin, or else. We looked at John 3:16. Look at the second verse following.

John 3:18 (NIV) Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Such a person stands condemned to death and hell already for his sins. Jesus speaks of this more than anyone. And some of the descriptions of what God will do to the earth at the end of time are pretty horrible. There will be horrible suffering on the earth when the righteous Judge brings judgment upon the horrific sin of mankind. Look at the following warnings.

Matthew 3:7 (NIV) But when he (John) saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"

This is God's wrath, or anger, that will be poured out upon the earth. This is God's judgment and punishment that will be given upon all who are alive at that terrible time.

Romans 1:18 (NIV) The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness,
(Romans 2:5; 9:22; Ephesians 5:6; Colossians 3:6; 1 Thessalonians 1:10)

How is the wrath of God being revealed? It is revealed in the Good News of salvation in Jesus. The wrath of God is part of the Gospel message. It is the bad news that makes the Good News, good. Never forget to include it, or you have failed to share the whole Gospel.

Do you remember how long before God brought judgment upon the Canaanites? It was 600 years. That 600 years was a slow-to-anger period of time. Earth is once more in a slow-to-anger period of time. We are living in this time now. There is ample evidence today of the growing immorality of the planet to levels never seen before.

But there will come a day when God's wrath will be poured out on the planet. Remember foundation #6, that we covered last week? **Jesus will one day judge all sin.** Look at one of the statements in the book of Revelation about that time. It describes people suffering during that time, and speaking to the mountains in the midst of earthquakes and such.

Revelation 6:16 (NIV) They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!"

Who is the lamb? Yes, Jesus is the lamb of God. Those people who say Jesus is all about love, have missed half of His message. Jesus will clean up the earth of sin before He hands it over to Yahweh, the Father.

Throughout the whole Bible we see both the love of God and the judgment of God.

In the flood God lovingly saved Noah's family, but brought upon judgment everyone else by drowning. Over and over in the Bible God blessed those who loved Him and brought judgment upon those who hated Him.

In the New Testament, remember how God was blessing the new Christians in the book of Acts? But He also judged grievous sin. Some of you will remember how God put to death Ananias and Sapphira who lied to the Holy Spirit and the apostles. And with that same kind of judgment, Paul warned the Christians in the city of Corinth that they must take the Lord's Supper, and the church, more seriously, or God would CONTINUE punishing them. He says some of the Christians in that church were sick, and others had died, at the hands of God for the sin in their church.

You parents establish rules for your home, for your children. And you establish consequences for breaking those rules. So that when those rules are broken, you give the consequences as discipline to teach obedience.

My sons used to accuse me of trying to make their lives miserable. At least once I admitted that was true. Then I said, "No, not really. We want you to be safe. And what you want to do is not safe. All of our rules are in your best interests."

That is what God does too. He is not unjust, mean, or hateful for doing so. His justice too is an act of love for all people.

The premise of the original question is wrong. God does not change. He is the same in the Old Testament as He is in the New Testament. Yahweh has the same character as Jesus. Jesus has the same character as Yahweh. There is no difference, for both are God and God is one.

God's love is compassionate, gracious, faithful, and merciful. But God will not leave the guilty unpunished. If you are troubled by passages in the Old Testament in which Yahweh deals out suffering and death, read a little deeper and see why. You will find sin at the heart of the matter.

God's wrath is never mysterious, irrational, malicious, spiteful, hateful, or vindictive. God's wrath is a just, considered response to injustice, lawbreaking, and disobedience. God has revealed how we are to behave towards Him and each other. To fail to do so is sin. And there is a price to be paid for sin.

Invitation:

God has acted with mercy towards all people. He wants to teach us of our sin and is giving us a chance to reject our sinful ways and turn to Him in obedience. He loves us so much that He sent Jesus to pay the penalty for our sin.

You can be forgiven today if you will admit your sin and receive Jesus as your savior, turning your life over to Him as your Lord.