



God Has Spoken Tract Series

CAN A GOD OF  LOVE
BE A GOD OF  WRATH ?

“Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, who is on the Lord’s side? let him come unto me. And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him. And he said unto them, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Put every man his sword by his side, and go in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor. And the children of Levi did according to the word of Moses: and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men” (Exodus 32:26-28).

Such passages of scripture as this are offensive to some people. A man told me, “I just can’t believe in a God who goes around killing people.” Moses had the same idea (Exodus 32:32).

At first thought my correspondent may seem to have a good point. Here is God leading his “chosen people” out of slavery into a “promised land,” and at a stop along the way he orders one tribe of them to “go in and out from gate to gate” killing their brothers, companions and neighbors! To the civilized man of the 21st century it does sound rather barbaric, doesn’t it? Rather *beneath* us than *above* us.

Then, too, what about those passages in the same Bible that describe God as the epitome of love (*i.e.* I John 4:8)? Aren’t the two images of God contradictory? Don’t these contradictions render the whole book unbelievable? Doesn’t someone worshipping a God of love have a *right* to

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds
(Hebrews 1:1-2).

reject a God of killing and destruction? Isn't the person right who says, "But my God is a loving God; He wouldn't do such things as that"?

IT'S NO LIE

Those who reason that way may be overlooking some very important facts. Certainly it is not a *lie* that the God of the Bible is a God of love; it is *scripture*! But so is the passage we quoted in the beginning (Exodus 32:26-28). So what can we do? We can believe that both passages describe the nature of God, and not inconsistently (I Corinthians 14:33)!

The wrath of God (Ephesians 5:6), his requirement that men obey him in order to receive his blessings (Eph. 5:1-3), and his punishment of the disobedient (Eph. 5:4-5), are necessary elements of his love and justice (Hebrews 12:5-11).

Think for a moment. Is it *love* that makes no rules governing a standard of behavior? Do parents permit their children – do societies permit their citizens – to act in whatever way appeals to them at any given moment? Such a condition would amount to anarchy. Rules are made to establish order and provide for the welfare of all who are subject to them.

The family, or kingdom, of God is no different. It is not reasonable to think that God would grant his blessings of eternal security to all people, regardless of their behavior or spiritual condition. He has established certain rules within which all people must live if they expect to receive the benefits of citizenship in his kingdom, or membership in his family (Eph. 1:3). If, then, rules are made, must they not be enforced? Must not the rule-breakers (law-breakers) within any civilized society be punished? Would we permit those who threaten our lives or security in our home towns to be left alone to work their evil deeds? Surely not! Would we, then, require God to leave unpunished those in his kingdom who would mock authority and tear down the rules by which that spiritual society is organized? Not if we are consistent.

Punishment of law-breakers does not necessarily imply lack of love. A parent can love a child, yet still punish the child on occasion. So, too, can God love his children and still punish them (Hebrews 12:5-7).

TAUGHT AT THE SAME TIME

Love and punishment are so connected that they are taught, not only in the same book, but in the same chapter. That chapter is not some obscure, out of the way chapter, either. It is the chapter perhaps most often quoted – even by unbelievers – concerning the love of God.

Millions of people who know almost nothing else about the Bible know that John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” How many are aware that John 3:36 says, “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not on the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him”?

“OK,” one might say, “I accept the principle of punishment, but why death? Couldn’t he just slap them on the wrist and tell them how wrong their behavior was?” Actually, some think that this is all that is included in God’s words to the Hebrews: “Ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth” (Hebrews 12:5-6).

Again, though, such people have not fully read the Bible. It is evident that the passage in Hebrews must be understood in the light of all that God has revealed about himself. Clearly, the scriptures indicate that God *did* sanction the death of at least some (many) of the disobedient during Old Testament times (New Testament also – Acts 5:1-11). Why?

EASY ANSWER: GOD SAID IT

The first and easiest answer is that such a punishment was consistent with the law and warnings of God. In the Garden of Eden, God had told Adam that he was not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. “For,” God said, “in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Gen. 2:16-17). The word that God used for “die” means “be separated.” God’s warning was that in the event of his disobedience, Adam would be separated from the garden and its benefits.

One of those benefits was close fellowship with God. In his sinless state Adam had walked with God, but having disobeyed, he was no longer accorded that privilege.

Another benefit of the garden was the tree of life. While Adam ate of that tree he could not and would not “die” (be separated from the flesh). Upon Adam’s sin, though, God both banished Adam from the garden (hence the tree) and put an angel-guard in the way of the tree to prevent man’s access (Gen. 3:24). No longer were Adam and his descendants blessed with uninterrupted, untroubled life (Gen. 3:17-19).

All those, then, who died under the authority of God throughout Bible history, died because of sin – not the sin of Adam, but their own sin (Hebrews 3:7-11). In the New Testament we read that “all have sinned” (Rom. 3:23) and that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). Each person pays the price for his own disobedience, not for that of Adam (Ezekiel 18:20).

The question still might be asked, though, “Why death? If it is because God said so, why did God say so? Could he not have determined a lesser punishment for disobedience if he had wanted to? If he wanted to, why didn’t he, and if he didn’t want to, why not? Doesn’t all this show God to be immoral and vindictive, and doesn’t that make him something less than the good, loving, and benevolent God his followers claim him to be? How can you say that God is loving and kind and gracious, and still acknowledge such severe wrath?”

Those are good questions. They deserve answers. They deserve answers from the Bible. The Bible does answer those questions, and in a way designed to lead man into a greater love of and devotion to God.

WHY DEATH?

If God punished the disobedient with death in order to keep his own promise, why did he promise death in the first place? Wouldn’t a loving God have dealt with disobedience in another way? No, he would not!

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). He created the stars of space, the atmosphere enveloping earth, all plant and animal life on earth, and, last of all, he created man. No other being ever had the power to create. God is omnipotent (all-powerful).

“And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it...” (Gen. 2:16, 17). God set certain limits

for man's behavior and then gave him the option of remaining within those limits or violating them: he gave man freedom of choice. God is omnibenevolent (all-loving).

“And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also to her husband with her; and he did eat” (Gen. 3:6). Man, knowing the limits which God had set for him, of his own free choice violated those limits. Man chose for himself contrary to what God had chosen for him.

God did not force man to obey, and for that reason God's will is sometimes seen as merely a request or suggestion offered to man. But behavior out of harmony with that will of God separates man from fellowship with God. Thus, the will of God is a command to man, the disobedience of which results in man's separation from God.

When God's creature, whom he made, elected to do what God did not want him to do, that creature separated himself from God. “Can two walk together, except they be agreed” (Amos 3:3)?

SIN, SEPARATION, DEATH

In God is life (John 1:4), and “he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things” (Acts 17:25). Since life is in God, then outside of God is not life, but death (I John 5:12). Since God gives life to all, no other being or power can give life to any. Thus to be separated from God is to have, not life, but death.

“Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” (I Samuel 16:7). God is omniscient (all-knowing). He knows the hearts of men, so he knows whether a sinner will repent. In earlier times, when God was showing himself to man by example (I Cor. 10:11) those who were completely lost in sin He destroyed in the flesh as an example of what sin will do. They were not going to turn; God used them as examples so that others might learn, and avoid the same fate (Rom. 15:4).

When God promised death for disobedience, He was not designing a punishment. He was merely stating the logical cause-and-effect facts that already existed by nature of the fact that He is the perfect creator. If He had never made the promise, it would still be a fact. From the fact that He promised it, we learn that He is trustworthy, powerful and to be obeyed.

WHY SO SEVERE?

Could a loving God have provided a lesser punishment for disobedience if He had wanted to? No, He could not! Since God is the perfect being that He is, everyone that is not God is imperfect – that is, not invariably choosing and doing right, not measuring up to the glory of God. In short, all have sinned (Rom. 3:23). Sin is transgression of (going beyond, or doing other than) God’s law or will (I John 3:4). To do other than God’s will is to separate oneself from God. To separate oneself from God is to separate oneself from life (John 1:4). Spiritual death is a simple, logical fact for all who sin (and all *do* sin). God has simply stated the logical truth, not made up a rule designed to be cruel to man. If a man does not love God sincerely and obey Him wilfully, that man will most assuredly perish absolutely.

God is not “immoral and vindictive.” He is not “something less than the good, loving, and benevolent God His followers claim him to be.” For him to have followed any other course of action than that he has followed in dealing with the sin of man would have shown Him to be less than perfect, hence, not God, no better than the equal of man.

We can “say that God is loving and kind and gracious, and still acknowledge such severe wrath” because God is not the author of sin in the world. He did not bring it in, and He does not perpetuate it here. He recognizes its existence, legislates against participation in it, provides a way of escape from its power, and encourages all mankind to avoid it. He is our God.

Don’t let a wrong idea of the nature of God prevent you from knowing the true, loving, and merciful God of Heaven. Attend Bible class and worship with the church of Christ, or ask for a free home Bible study.

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