

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Why is the Old Testament God so mean and the New Testament God so nice?

Sunday, May 26, 2019

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2 Timothy 3:16-17 & Hebrews 4:12

We continue our series “Big Questions about the Bible.” Let’s face it – the Bible can be difficult to understand sometimes. It also can be disturbing in places. So, in this series, we are asking honest questions about the Bible and hope to grow in our understanding of God. I don’t know any Christian with a deep faith who has *not* gone through periods of questioning and doubting. Doubt is the front porch to a deeper faith. How can we grow unless we ask honest questions about the Bible and our faith?

Today we are going address the Bible and some of the disturbing and unsettling passages in it. Whether you are an atheist, an agnostic, a seeker, a Christian, or someone who is just curious, sooner or later you will ask one of these questions: How do you make sense of the disturbing passages in the Bible? Why does God seem mean in the Old Testament but nice in the New Testament? If God is so loving, then why does he command people to murder in the Old Testament?

I remember getting a haircut one time. I was having a good conversation with the lady cutting my hair. Eventually, she got around to asking me what I did for a living. When I told her I was a preacher, she responded, “Whoa! Really? Really?” I took that as a compliment. I was a glad I did not fit the stereotype of typical preacher!

She said to me, “I have a confession to make.” I said, “What’s that?” She said, “I’ve never really been a very religious person. I believe in God but I don’t go to church very much. Recently, a friend of mine gave me a Bible as a gift and told me that if I read it, it would change my life. Well, honestly, after reading some of it, I have more questions than I have answers. It hasn’t changed me; it confuses me.” Then she asked the question that I get a lot: “Why Does God seem mean in the Old Testament but really nice in the New Testament?” Then she began to give me example after example of some disturbing passages in the Old Testament that really troubled her. She said, “I want to

believe in God but I am having a hard time with the Bible.”

Folks, this is not an isolated incident. I get these kinds of questions all the time about the Bible – from waiters and waitresses to people I meet on vacation and parishioners who secretly confess to me their struggles with the Bible. And, if you listen to critics of faith in the media, this is one of the biggest issues they point to: What do we do with those violent and unsettling passages in the Bible that don’t square with a loving God?

For example, what about the biblical command to put to death any children who disobey their parents? Or what about the passages that say those who work on the Sabbath should be executed? And, by the way, none of us would be sitting here if we still practiced those commands!

What about the biblical mandate that women cannot speak in church or wear jewelry? What about passages that express the idea that women are to be viewed as property and subservient to men? And what about the Bible forbidding anyone to eat shrimp cocktail or forbidding men to shave their beards? Then, there are even the passages which suggest that slavery is approved by God!

What about this passage from Exodus? Moses has just come down from the mountain to reveal the Ten Commandments, and he finds his people worshipping other gods and doing perverse things. He gathers the people who desire to be faithful to God and says, **“Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor.’”**²⁸ **The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day” (Exodus 32:27-28).**

Many people think, “And this is supposed to be the Word of God? What?” Maybe you are an atheist or an agnostic, and you feel this way. Maybe you think,

“With all these disturbing passages, how can anyone say that the Bible is a perfect guide for your life? I can’t believe in a God who would command people to kill others.”

Maybe you are a seeker. You recognize you have a spiritual hunger, and you are encouraged by what you have heard in this series. But, there are some lingering doubts, and one of them is some of the things you read in the Bible. Maybe you have asked, “How do I reconcile these commands of God in the Old Testament about executing people to Jesus’ words of mercy and love and forgiveness?” On the one hand, you have God in the Old Testament commanding that disobedient children should be stoned to death, and yet, you have Jesus in the New Testament saving a woman who has been caught in the act of adultery from being stoned. How do we reconcile that?

Perhaps you are a Christian, and you love God. But, you have problems with some of the things in the Bible, and you are afraid to talk about them. Or maybe you are a Christian, and you have friends who always talk about these disturbing passages, but you are stumped when they ask you questions about them.

So how do we make sense of all this? How do we see the Bible as inspired by God when faced with these disturbing passages? How can we be confident that the Word of God is true with these unsettling verses?

What I am about to share with you will help many of you who struggle with this issue. I believe it will open new insights for some of you who have a hard time accepting the Bible as God’s Word. For some of you, this message will help you see the Bible in a completely new way. What I am about to share will help some of you get unstuck from this issue, and you will feel liberated to allow God’s Word to finally nourish and guide you. I also believe what I will share will help many of you answer questions from critics who challenge you about the Bible.

This subject may be uncomfortable for some of you today. You really don’t want to think about this stuff. It upsets you. And, truthfully, maybe some of you really don’t understand why I am preaching on this controversial subject. Well, the way I see it, the Bible is our book as Christians. We believe it is the Word of God, and people are going to ask us questions about this book. If we, as Christians, are serious about reaching other people for Christ, we need to take their questions seriously and not ignore them. And, if we believe it is God’s Word, we should be able to defend it, right?

Old Testament vs. New Testament?

I want to begin by helping us get some perspective on the Old and New Testaments. A lot of people think of the Old Testament and think God was angry and mean back then. Then, they read the New Testament and think God got soft and lightened up. Did God see a therapist or something? Did God really change? No, God didn’t change. There is an old story about a little girl who was once confronted with some of the more bloodthirsty and savage parts of the Old Testament. Her comment was: “But that happened before God became a Christian!”

Well, God has always been a Christian. The whole New Testament tells us that God has always been like Jesus. In the first chapter of gospel of John, we are told that in the very beginning, the “Word” was with God, and the “Word” was God. That “Word” was Jesus who became “flesh” and dwelt among us.” The Word was God since the very beginning.

Look at it this way. There are around 23,000 verses in the Old Testament. Only about 200 of the verses are the ones many folks consider disturbing. So, there are about 22,800 verses in the Old Testament that speak of God’s love, mercy, kindness, and forgiveness. Let’s get some perspective. God hasn’t changed; our understanding of God has changed. I will speak more on that later.

Some of you may think, “Okay but what about those 200 verses? Those are very serious and disturbing. If we are supposed to take the whole Bible as God’s Word, then what do we do with those? How do we make sense of those?”

Dynamic Inspiration

To make sense of the Bible, we have to understand how the Bible is inspired. I think some folks have this notion that God put the writers of the Bible in a trance and gave them the mind of a PhD for a couple of hours and then forced them to write down words. They woke up like they had been abducted by aliens, and there was this document in front of them. That’s not how it happened.

Most mainline Christians believe in what is called *Dynamic Inspiration*. Dynamic Inspiration is a view that states that all the thoughts and ideas in the Bible are *inspired by God*, and God allowed the writers to use their own words and understanding to convey those ideas. In other words, the writers of the Bible were inspired and moved by God within their own frame of reference and humanity. They wrote in light of their cultural setting, their limited understanding of science,

as well as their biases and perspectives. God spoke to them within their own context.

This view shows the dynamic quality of God's inspiration – that the words of the Bible are not dictated words stuck in the past; they are human words that contain God-inspired ideas that moved people in the past and still move people today!

To say the Bible is inspired means the Bible is a living and breathing document that contains God-inspired ideas that continue to inspire. That's what the Bible says about itself in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, "**All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.**" The word "inspired" in this verse means, "God-breathed." God did not force or coerce the writers of the Bible; God breathed on them. God's divinity moved within their humanity to show us who he is and who he wants us to be.

This means the Bible is living and active. It is not just words on a page. Look at Hebrews 4:12: "**For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.**"

Progressive Revelation

What comes out of the Bible's "Dynamic Inspiration" is a principle that I believe will help many of you make sense of the Bible's disturbing passages. I want you to listen closely, because this will be a game-changer for some of you. This principle is called **Progressive Revelation**. Progressive Revelation means that the Bible shows a *gradual understanding* of who God is. From Genesis to Revelation, we see a gradual and clearer understanding of God. Essentially, the writers of the Bible grew in their understanding of God.

This makes sense. For example, if someone starts taking guitar lessons, they don't begin with a difficult classical piece then immediately get asked by the teacher to perform in front of a crowd. They begin with simple instruction on how to put their hands on the guitar, and they improve over time. It is the same way when we first become Christians. We don't begin with a perfect understanding of God and theology. We grow in our understanding of God over our lifetimes. The way we understood God when we were children is surely different than the way we understand God now.

The Bible is a testimony to progressive revelation. We begin with Abraham's parents in the Bible. In the Bible, we see that Abraham's parents were polytheists – they believed in many gods. But then God spoke to Abraham and said, "It is just me! I am the only God. There is only one God, and it's me." God called Abraham to be the father of all nations.

Then Moses appeared on the scene and presented the Ten Commandments. He told God's people that if they were to follow God faithfully, they needed to abide by certain boundaries and rules. The people of God were faithful for a while, but then they messed up and asked God for forgiveness, and God forgave them. The entire Old Testament is a repeat of that same story.

Gradually the Prophets appeared, and they said, "God does not want your animal sacrifices and obsession with rules; he wants love in your hearts. He wants you to be merciful."

Finally, Jesus showed up. He was God in the flesh! He gave us the clearest picture of God. In Jesus, we see that God is a God of love, mercy, forgiveness, and grace. In Jesus, we finally have 20/20 vision of God. Therefore, **Jesus is the lens through which we view all of scripture**. We read the Bible in light of God's revelation to us in Jesus Christ.

Many of the Old Testament writers lived in a culture of people who believed in many gods, and they believed many of these gods were warriors. Those who followed God came along and proclaimed, "There is only one God, and he is the strongest warrior!" Well, that makes sense. In their own primitive context, they were saying God is all-powerful. So, you can see why they would sometimes reference God as a vengeful warrior. It is what they knew in their own time. It was their frame of reference. But we see that frame of reference continue to grow throughout the Bible until we finally see the clearest picture of God in Jesus.

I like what William Barclay concludes about this issue: "What of the anger and the destructiveness and the jealousy of God that we sometimes read of in the older parts of Scripture? The answer is this – it is not God who has changed; it is men's knowledge of him that has changed. Men wrote these things because they did not know any better; that was the stage which their knowledge of God had reached."

When we have this understanding of progressive revelation, we don't get upset by disturbing passages or what appear to be inconsistencies. It does not throw our faith off track. We know God inspired human beings to

write ideas about him, and their understanding of God was a gradual process.

Look at it this way: sermons are not at the same level of inspiration as the Bible, but what if you heard me make a mistake in my sermon? Say I referenced the wrong passage or fumbled over a word or got the wrong date on something? Would you say, “Well, that sermon ain’t worth a darn!”? Would that discredit the entire sermon? Would that mistake discredit all my sermons? I hope not. It is my hope that my messages are perhaps helpful to some people.

Or, think of the U.S. Constitution. Most of us revere that document, but we recognize that when it was drafted, it was bound by time. Slavery was alive and well, and women did not have the same rights as men. Over time, we have grown in our interpretation of the Constitution while still revering and respecting its essence for us. The Bible is certainly more inspired than the Constitution, but I believe our approach to the Bible should work in the same way.

At the end of the day, the Bible is not meant to be debated; it is meant to be read. We encounter God’s ideas for us through the Bible. God guides us and feeds us and empowers us through the same ideas that inspired Abraham, Moses, the Prophets, the disciples, and Paul.

When I think of Abraham and Sarah and how God blessed them with a child in their old age, I think of a couple who told me that they had prayed and prayed to have a child, and they thought it wasn’t to be. They reread the story of Abraham and Sarah and had faith. One day, they get the news! They are pregnant or the adoption has come through!

I read about King David and think of people who come to see me who feel they have done too many bad things. They think they are of no use to God. And then I tell them the story of David who screwed up

royally and God still used him in a mighty way. They light up! They have hope!

I think of being at the bed side of someone who is sick and providing comfort and strength by saying, “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want...”

I think of little children who run around saying and doing the craziest, yet the wisest, things, and I think of Jesus words, “Unless you can become like a child you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

I think of the values of this world and how they often get confused with the values of God, and I remember Jesus’ words, “The last shall be first and the first shall be last....He who would be great in the Kingdom must be a servant.”

When I am anxious I read, “Be still and know that I am God.” When I mess up and hurt others, I remember, “Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way.”

Read the Bible. If you have never read it, give it a try. Ask God to help you read it and get a good commentary. Just try it and see. What do you have to lose? As someone once said, “The Bible doesn’t just increase knowledge; it changes lives. The Bible doesn’t just talk *about* us; it talks *to* us. The Bible brings us back to our senses.” Amen.

William Barclay’s commentary on the Gospel of John and his book “Introducing the Bible” were helpful resources for this sermon. In addition, my seminary class notes from Old Testament studies, Adam Hamilton’s address on “The Bible,” and Wikipedia were also useful resources for this sermon.