

14 January 2018

The Problem(s) with God: Will the Real Biblical God Please Stand Up?

1 John 4:7-12; Joshua 11:16-20

Last week, I opened this sermon series on problems with God by talking about the prior question of whether God exists. Now, if you were here, you will remember that I didn't offer proof. If we could prove the existence of God, I suppose we'd have to stop calling ourselves a "faith," wouldn't we? But I *did* point out that, with or without proof, most humans are wired for faith. For whatever reason, we share this conviction that there is a reality beyond this world. This is why most of the people who reject the God of their childhood end up just putting their faith in something else – astrology, healing crystals, antioxidants. As a quote often attributed to G. K. Chesterton puts it, "The first effect of not believing in God is to believe anything."

Starting, then, with the assumption that we are wired for faith, we're going to spend the rest of this series puzzling over the Christian understanding of God. What is our God like? So we read now from our New Testament, 1 John 4, verses 7-12.

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Now there, I think most of us could agree, is a God worth believing in. This God is, in essence, Love and lives to express love, whatever that costs. Moreover, the way to worship and serve such a God is simply to love others. This is great. I can easily imagine someone drawn to this God picking up our Bible to find out more. He starts at the beginning, of course, and there's some wonderful stuff in the early pages, although it's interspersed with some dull lists of names. But then he comes to some troubling bits where God doesn't seem to act like a God of love. Like those plagues of Egypt. Did God *have* to kill all the Egyptian first born to make a point? Even the livestock? Doesn't seem fair. And then God sends the Israelites from Egypt back to the Promised Land, and we read this from Joshua 11, verses 16-20.

¹⁶ So Joshua took all that land: the hill country and all the Negeb and all the land of Goshen and the lowland and the Arabah and the hill country of Israel and its lowland, ¹⁷from Mount Halak, which rises towards Seir, as far as Baal-gad in the valley of Lebanon below Mount Hermon. He took all their kings, struck them down, and put them to death. ¹⁸Joshua made war a long time with all those kings. ¹⁹There was not a town that made peace with the Israelites, except the Hivites, the inhabitants of Gibeon; all were taken in battle. ²⁰For it was the Lord's doing to harden their hearts so that they would come against Israel in battle, in order that they might be utterly destroyed, and might receive no mercy, but be exterminated, just as the Lord had commanded Moses.

Well, you see the problem. On the one hand we have this loving New Testament God, and on the other hand we have an Old Testament God commanding the Israelites to commit genocide. It feels like two unrelated deities.

That's actually one way that people have dealt with the problem: maybe they're different gods. In the second century, a religious group called the "Gnostics" taught that the god who created the world was a sort of half-wit god, who thought highly of himself, but was in fact an impulsive, bad-tempered, jealous, narcissistic, and incompetent being who got angry over trifles – not the sort to put in charge of anything. This, the Gnostics said, was the God of the Old Testament. But above that god was a God of pure spirit and light and love, who sent an image of himself named Jesus to earth to show a better way. The problem with that solution, though, is that Jesus himself said he came to fulfill the Old Testament and identified *that* God as his Father. To maintain the two-god approach, the Gnostics had to scrap not only the Old Testament but most of the New Testament. But you'll still hear people talking about the "Old Testament God" as if that were a different being.

Some Christians have tried to reconcile the two pictures of God by explaining the differences away, declaring that really there isn't any contradiction, if you just look closely. Now, these people do make some good points. In fact, God in the New Testament isn't all sweetness and light. There plenty of judgment there, too, and Jesus is not the meek and mild pale Galilean that we have seen portrayed in movies by various Hollywood wimps. Moreover, the Old Testament often portrays God as a God of mercy, forgiveness, and love. "The Lord is compassionate and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" it says over and over. So the two portrayals of God aren't as far apart as they might seem. But the differences can't all be explained away. I recall one Sunday School teacher's justification of the genocide in Joshua. She said, "You know, the reason God told them to do that was because if any of the Canaanites were left alive, they would corrupt the Israelites' faith with their false gods. And he was *right!* That's exactly what happened!" So what? What are you saying? That it's justifiable to wipe out a whole population because they might be a bad influence? No, that doesn't work.

Most people, though, try a third approach to dealing with this problem. They ignore it. They pretend that those troubling passages just don't exist. I guess that can provide some comfort. But I can't do that. I care about the Bible too much to lie about it.

So here's what I do. Like many of you, I was raised with the teaching that the Bible was inspired directly by God, right down to the individual words. If God didn't actually dictate it, God at least had final editorial approval, so that everything written in this book is to be considered the direct message of God. Well, I still believe that God inspired the Bible, but I understand the process differently now. This book was written by dozens of different authors from many different cultures over the course of more than a thousand years. The words that they composed, just like the words of any other author, reflect their own time and cultural backgrounds and individual personalities. God works *through* that context, without necessarily affirming it, and every now and then, through the cracks, a glimmer of something new and eternal breaks through. These flashes of divinity, put together, paint a breathtaking and consistent picture of a God of justice and compassion and love, but you have to sift through the rest to get that.

Let me illustrate how that works. At the time the Old Testament was written, every religion served its god by means of animal sacrifice. The more valuable the sacrifice the more favor you purchased with your god. If you *really* needed something big, you'd have to sacrifice something precious, up to and including your own child. Well, the Hebrew Bible encourages worshipping God by means of animal sacrifice, just like everyone else did, but there are some

curious differences in the Old Testament. First of all, you can't buy God's favor by sacrifice. God can't be bribed. Sacrifices are to be expressions of thanksgiving for what God has done and will do. That's all. And second – and here the Old Testament law gets very direct – no one is ever, under any circumstances, to sacrifice a human. These are pretty significant differences, and even more significantly, they are unique. There's nothing like this in any other religion of its time. That's what I mean by God working through a cultural context, but still revealing something new. The truth of God is not found in the ancient cultural practice of animal sacrifice, but in the unique stamp that God put on the old custom. Today, animal sacrifice is out of fashion, but those revelations remain true. You still can't bribe God with your sacrifices.

So what about that genocide? Well, it isn't as neat. Again, the idea of total extermination through Holy War was a common theme in the Ancient Near East. Every war between nations was seen as a war between those nations' gods, and it was winner-god-take-all. Israel did it, too, and they assumed that when they did it, they were doing the will of God. That's what the culture taught. What I find interesting, though, is that even in Joshua, the Book of Genocide, there are these carefully preserved stories of God making exceptions – people like Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute, who showed more faith in Israel's God than Israel did and was delivered, along with her family, as a result. It's a story that flat-out contradicts the slaughter-them-all narrative of most of the book. And it's not the only exception. Again, I see this as God managing to shine a new light through a chink in the cultural wall, hinting that God is not a tribal God but a God for all people, even non-Jews. What I'm saying is that though the picture of God changes in the Bible, the God behind the Bible has remained the same God of justice and love, forgiveness and mercy to all the world. It's just that the cultural clothing that the biblical narrative wears can sometimes obscure, rather than reveal, that True God.

That's how I deal with the wildly different pictures of God in our Bible, and I believe it's the only way to deal with them honestly. But before you decide to agree with me, you need to know what I've had to give up. The reason that many cling to a belief in an infallible scripture dictated by God is because that gives them a rock of certainty in a frighteningly unstable world. When everything else is falling apart or changing more quickly than we can process, it can be a huge comfort to have one eternal unchanging absolute source of truth. God said, I believe it, that settles it. But I can't do that anymore. I don't have that certainty that I can open up this book and find God's infallible answer to my problems. Basically, I've said that some of the stuff in here reveals the nature of God, and some doesn't. Some just reveals the nature of this or that ancient culture. And that makes it hard, because how do you tell which is which? To be able to sift the revelation of God out of everything else in here takes time, attention, study, and just hard work. Memorizing a few Bible verses that say things you like and then quoting them as "the Word of God" at people you disagree with is easy. Any idiot can do that, and many do. Finding those elusive gleams of God behind the ancient writings of this book – that takes effort. For starters, you're going to have to read the blame thing.

Fortunately, there are a couple of basic rules that you can learn today to help sort the wheat from the chaff. First, the more specific a biblical teaching is, the more skeptical you should be. When Paul writes, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself" that's a pretty broad statement. Take that one seriously. When Paul says that women should wear their hair long and should never wear gold or other ornaments and should keep their mouths shut in church – meh, that's first century Greek culture, and that's Paul. Don't let it keep you up at night. But most of all, in looking for the real biblical God, we have a place to start. Jesus is the center.

Jesus is the purest and most complete revelation of the nature of God, both in scripture and in history. Jesus is the yardstick against which all the rest of the Bible must be measured. So how, in the end, do we deal with that Old Testament genocide? Jesus said, "Love your enemies." There's the voice of the true God.

Hey, I said it was true. I didn't say it would be easy.