

THE BLOODY BIBLE #1: WHY IS THE GOD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT SO ANGRY?

We begin this morning with our first question: why is the God of the Old Testament so angry and so different from the God we see in the New Testament? Well, there are some assumptions that exist that affect the answer to that question. Firstly, in the Old Testament we do see God enacting judgement. ²² **"Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. ²³ If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. ²⁴ My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless. Exodus 22:24.**

God is a righteous judge, a God who displays his wrath every day. Psalm 7:11.

⁷**A lion has come out of his lair; a destroyer of nations has set out. He has left his place to lay waste your land. Your towns will lie in ruins without inhabitant. ⁸ So put on sackcloth, lament and wail, for the fierce anger of the LORD has not turned away from us. Jeremiah 4:7-8.** There are a lot of laws with punishments in the Old Testament for a simple reason: God was training up his people. He was developing a new community, a new nation, that had come from a very pagan and immoral background, which meant the need for a lot of rules, and the discipline needed to enforce those rules.

These kinds of verses make us feel very uncomfortable and so they should. There are a few assumptions that we need to deal with straight away. Firstly, that God shouldn't get angry. Secondly, if we get rid of the God of the Old Testament we are left with a loving Jesus. The early church wrestled with this question and always maintained that God was not different in the Old Testament than he was in the New Testament. In fact, Jesus does get angry. ⁴⁰ **"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'**⁴¹ **"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'**⁴⁴ **"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' ⁴⁵ "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'**⁴⁶ **"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." Matthew 25:40-46.**

⁵ **"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. John 15:5-8.**

In the Old Testament we discover a God who has anger rather than a God of anger. We should notice that God's anger is always about something, He is not always angry. So, what makes God angry? ²¹ **"Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt. ²² "Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. ²³ If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. ²⁴ My anger will be**

aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless. Exodus 22:21-24. Here we see God's anger is about oppression and injustice. All throughout the Bible we see a God who cannot tolerate this kind of injustice.

²³ **I looked at the earth, and it was formless and empty; and at the heavens, and their light was gone. ²⁴ I looked at the mountains, and they were quaking; all the hills were swaying. ²⁵ I looked, and there were no people; every bird in the sky had flown away. ²⁶ I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert; all its towns lay in ruins before the LORD, before his fierce anger. Jeremiah 4:23-26.** In Jeremiah we see God grow angry because humans have damaged his creation. ¹¹ **Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. ¹² God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. Genesis 6:11-12.** So, God exercises his anger at injustice, idolatry, sin and the devastation they cause.

Secondly, we see that God's anger is mixed with grief. ¹⁸ **"Your own conduct and actions have brought this on you. This is your punishment. How bitter it is! How it pierces to the heart!" ¹⁹ Oh, my anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain. Oh, the agony of my heart. My heart pounds within me; I cannot keep silent. For I have heard the sound of the trumpet; I have heard the battle cry. ²⁰ Disaster follows disaster; the whole land lies in ruins. In an instant my tents are destroyed, my shelter in a moment. Jeremiah 4:11-20.** Alongside God's just judgement we see this expression of grief. Ellen Davis an Old Testament scholar says this; **we get a glimpse into the heart of God even when he is exercising judgment.**

Thirdly, we see God withholding his judgement out of his love for his people. We see this in the book of Hosea, ⁴ **I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them. ⁵ "Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent? ⁶ A sword will flash in their cities; it will devour their false prophets and put an end to their plans. ⁷ My people are determined to turn from me. Even though they call me God Most High, I will by no means exalt them. ⁸ "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboyim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. ⁹ I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not a man— the Holy One among you. I will not come against their cities. Hosea 11:4-9.**

At first glance on the flood story, we may see what we think is a super angry and irrational God. However, the flood story is not a story on God's anger but his grief. ⁶ **The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. Genesis 6:6.** Here, again we see God's judgment directly alongside his grief. However, his anger always has a purpose. ¹¹ **Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. ¹² God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. ¹³ So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. Genesis 6:11-13.**

Someone described it as a house with wood rot. Once it is widespread, it is only a matter of time before it collapses if it is not dealt with. It cannot be saved. So, in the flood story we see that God gives the world over, due to widespread injustice and rebellion and the desecration of his creation. Then we see God form a new commitment with his people and his creation. ¹¹ **I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."**
Genesis 9:11.

Then we see so often what I am calling the prophet principle. That is, God's announcement of Justice is meant to bring the people to repentance and if they repent God will withhold his judgment. For example, ¹¹ **When Solomon had finished the temple of the LORD and the royal palace, and had succeeded in carrying out all he had in mind to do in the temple of the LORD and in his own palace, ¹² the LORD appeared to him at night and said: "I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices. ¹³ "When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, ¹⁴ if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land. ¹⁵ Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place. ¹⁶ I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my Name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there.**

¹⁷ **"As for you, if you walk before me faithfully as David your father did, and do all I command, and observe my decrees and laws, ¹⁸ I will establish your royal throne, as I covenanted with David your father when I said, 'You shall never fail to have a successor to rule over Israel.' ¹⁹ "But if you turn away and forsake the decrees and commands I have given you and go off to serve other gods and worship them, ²⁰ then I will uproot Israel from my land, which I have given them, and will reject this temple I have consecrated for my Name. I will make it a byword and an object of ridicule among all peoples. ²¹ This temple will become a heap of rubble. All who pass by will be appalled and say, 'Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and to this temple?' ²² People will answer, 'Because they have forsaken the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who brought them out of Egypt, and have embraced other gods, worshipping and serving them—that is why he brought all this disaster on them.'" 2 Chronicles 7:11-22.**

Also, in the book of Jonah, Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ² **"Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."** ³ **Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. ⁴ Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown."** ⁵ **The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.**

⁶ **When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷ This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles:**

Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸ But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.” ¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened. Jonah 3: 1-10.

As I have studied this topic, I have come to a startling conclusion. So often God withholds his just judgement. He shows radical restraint and gives people an option. A way out, repent and turn from your evil ways and come back to me. When they do, he deliberately and graciously withholds judgement. Why? because he genuinely does not delight in having to bring destruction on the people and the land.

⁶ And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.” Exodus 34: 6-7.

Here, we see a depiction of God. He is slow to anger but will not let the guilty go unpunished. A comment about verse seven. The reference to the third and fourth generation. This refers to the current household. During this time most households had many generations living together. So, God is saying that no one in the household will be spared punishment. However, we also see his mercy in that his judgement does not go any further than a household.

In Amos, we read this, **¹² For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts. ¹³ Therefore the prudent keep quiet in such times, for the times are evil. ¹⁴ Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. ¹⁵ Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph. Amos 5:12-15.**

The Israelites thought that as long as they sung their songs and made offerings, they could do whatever they wanted. Here is how God responds to that. **²¹ “I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. ²² Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. ²³ Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. ²⁴ But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! Amos 5:21-24.**