

A JUST AND MERCIFUL GOD

God had a problem! Well, he didn't really have a problem because God doesn't have problems, but it sure seems like a problem. On the one hand, he promised Adam that if he ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would die. "*On the day you eat of it, you will surely die,*" he said. (Genesis 2:17) Well we all know what happened: Adam disobeyed God and so he died. And since we all disobey God just like Adam did, we must die as well. But God doesn't want us to die; He loves us and wants us to live forever. As He says through the prophet Ezekiel: "*I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked but would that they would turn from their ways and live.*" (Ezekiel 18:23) God wants us to live but we must die. Justice demands our death; mercy gives us life. It doesn't seem like he could have it both ways: we can't be alive and dead at the same time.

So how can God be both just and merciful? If a man has to die for his sins as God said, how can he keep him alive without making Himself a liar?

To view the problem from another perspective, how do we deal with our own children? When they disobey us do we punish them with the rod of discipline in order to teach them the consequences of sin? Or do we forgive them in the name of love and risk teaching them that there aren't any consequences to sin? The Bible seems to lean more toward the rod. The *Book of Proverbs* contains seven admonitions to use the rod of discipline and only one admonition to withhold it.

As parents we have all agonized over whether to punish our children or forgive them when they misbehave. Often we just follow our own predispositions. Some parents lean toward strictness and discipline while others are more comfortable with leniency and affirmation.

Reverend Otis Moss, a highly respected local preacher from the east side of Cleveland once said that if you administer pure justice to a child you will quickly become a child-abuser. On the other hand, if you fail to discipline the child at all, you will encourage rebellious behavior and the child will grow up without understanding the consequences sin can have in his life.

That's the problem we've all had as parents and it's the same problem God has with us. It's often seemed to me that the way we act toward God is a lot like the way a rebellious teenager acts toward his parents: he loves them but he drives them crazy with his obnoxious behavior. I recall once seeing a picture in the paper of a man who had set up a table on his front lawn with a set of encyclopedias on it. A sign over the table read: "ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA FOR SALE; HAVE TEENAGE SON WHO ALREADY KNOWS IT ALL" I'm pretty sure we can all relate.

So what do we do? How much punishment is too much? How much is too little? How much forgiveness is too much? How much is too little? When we look at the Scriptures, it almost seems as if God wrestled with the problem in the same way that we do. Time and again His anger breaks out over our sins. At one point He says of the Israelites: *"I will send the sword, famine and plague against them and...make them abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth and an object of cursing and horror, of scorn and reproach among all the nations where I drive them."* (Jeremiah 29:17-18) At another point he thunders: *"...they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind."* (Isaiah 66:24) If it were not God speaking we'd say it was a human father having a temper tantrum. Yet on other occasions God's mercy and love for his disobedient children wells up in Him and defuses His anger: *"My people are determined to turn from me...[but]...How can I give [them] up? How can I hand you over, Israel?...My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger...for I am God and not man...I will not come in wrath."* (Hosea 11:7-9) Judgment or mercy? Grace or wrath?

Interestingly, the form of God's solution to the problem appears in the mystical writings of the Jews during the four hundred years between the death of Malachi, the last of the *Old Testament* prophets, and the appearance of John the Baptist, the first of the *New Testament* prophets. Biblical scholars call this the "Intertestamental Period" because the Bible is silent as to what took place during that time. These mystical writings repeatedly express the hope that God would send a messiah who would restore Israel to her former glory by creating a new kingdom.

The rabbis, however, were divided as to what form this messiah would take and what he would do when he came. Some expected a human messiah, a warrior king who would be a descendent of David who would restore David's empire. He would raise up the walls of Jerusalem, rebuild the temple and establish a new world order they called "the peace of Jerusalem."

Others looked for a supernatural messiah, an angel or perhaps God Himself, who would descend from the heavens, restore Israel, and punish her enemies. This supernatural messiah was called the "son of man," a title taken from Daniel's vision of heaven in the seventh chapter of his book where he wrote: *"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days [God] and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."* (Daniel 7:13-14)

Two different visions of who the messiah would be and what he would do when he came. One—a heavenly being who would judge the enemies of God and establish an eternal kingdom. The other, an earthly prince who would rebuild Jerusalem and restore Israel to her former glory.

One has to admire the wisdom of the Jewish mystics and wonder if God wasn't coaching them along in their thinking. With their faith in the covenant promises of God and their exhaustive knowledge of the Torah, the rabbis combed the writings of the Old Testament prophets to determine what form God said that the coming messiah would take. And if you put their ideas together, they almost had it right. When Messiah finally came, He did things that both groups of rabbis expected. He was a son of man, a descendent of David, who came to establish a New Jerusalem, a new Temple and a new world order. But He was also a supernatural being, the Son of God who had come to judge the enemies of His people—Satan and his legions—and to usher in a dominion that would never pass away, a kingdom that would never be destroyed. He went about it, however, in a very different way from that which the rabbis had expected.

He came in weakness, not in strength, coming in the form of a frail, dependent child. But what a child! He was both a just God and a merciful Savior. He was the son of man in Daniel's vision who would establish a peaceable kingdom by removing the sin that stood between man and God, and he was the Son of God to Whom God had given all authority, glory and sovereign power. But he would do it not by making himself a ruler of men, but by making himself a servant of men. He would do it not by seizing human power and authority but by submitting to human power and authority. He would not do it by making himself great among men, but by making himself least among men. As we sang a few minutes ago in the song El Shaddai: *"Though your word contained the plan, they just could not understand; Your most awesome work was done through the frailty of your Son."*

"How could they not have seen it," we say. *"How could they have missed it?"* But aren't we just as blind at times as they were? Do we really believe that power resides in enslaving ourselves to the needs of others rather than tending to our own well-being? Do we truly forgive in our hearts those who have injured us or do we nurse angry thoughts and feelings in our hearts toward them? Do we really buy into the idea that in order to be the greatest of all, we have to make ourselves least of all? Do we?

For that matter, how about the Apostles themselves? They had walked, talked, eaten, slept and prayed with Jesus for three years; they had seen him crucified, embalmed and buried and then seen him after he rose from the dead—yet some of them still doubted that He was who He claimed to be. He had clearly told them that He had not come to establish a worldly kingdom, yet the last time he met with them before he ascended into heaven, they asked him, *"Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"* (Acts 1:6) The Kingdom of God was staring them in the face and they were still looking for an earthly kingdom. They didn't get the point until the Holy Spirit blew their heads off at Pentecost. Unfortunately, sometimes we don't either.

To an unbelieving, dis-spirited, dying world, the events that took place at Bethlehem mean nothing. But to the believer, what happened at Bethlehem means everything. A brilliant light had come into the world which cleaved the darkness and proclaimed the arrival of a God who would be both just and merciful: Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the Christ.

And as we look forward to celebrating this birth, let the words of the Psalmist warm our hearts: *“Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.” (Psalm 98:7-9)*

Amen.

Psalm 51 For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.

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| <p>¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
² Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.</p> <p>³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.
⁵ Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
⁶ Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret place.</p> <p>⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
⁹ Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.</p> <p>¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.</p> <p>¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
so that sinners will turn back to you.
¹⁴ Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O</p> | <p>God,
you who are God my Savior,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.</p> <p>¹⁵ Open my lips, Lord,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
¹⁶ You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would
bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
¹⁷ My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.</p> <p>¹⁸ May it please you to prosper Zion,
to build up the walls of Jerusalem.
¹⁹ Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the
righteous,
in burnt offerings offered whole;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.</p> |
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