

QUESTIONS SKEPTICS ASK ABOUT THE GOD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

To be skeptical is not wrong. Those who are not may pay dearly for being overly trusting. People who don't ask questions are apt to end up kicking themselves for being so careless.

It isn't wrong to be skeptical about the Bible. No one has to accept it on blind faith. If it can't stand up to honest questions, it doesn't deserve to be relied on. The God who said, "Come now, and let us reason together" (Isa. 1:18) invites us to involve our hearts and minds to

determine whether or not the Bible is indeed His inspired Word.

With this invitation, we come to the God of the Old Testament. We can admit that we are bothered by the violence, anger, and deception that we find associated with Him. And we don't need to pretend that we don't see the differences between the Old and New Testaments. Although Jesus told His followers to love their enemies and do good to those who harmed them, it seems that the God of the Old Testament did just the opposite.

The differences appear to be real, but are they? We hope that what you read in the following pages will help to answer questions that have troubled many people.

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CAN THOUGHTFUL PEOPLE BELIEVE IN THIS GOD?

Today's readers of the Bible might have problems with the religious wars of the Old Testament. According to international laws of war, civilians and inactive members of engaged forces have a right to protection. Common Article 3 of the Geneva Convention of 1949 says, "Persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of the armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed (outside of combat) by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause, shall in all circumstances be treated humanely."

Yet the God of the Old Testament seems to live below these common standards of human

decency. By ordering the armies of Israel to destroy not only opposing forces but women, children, and

***International
rules condemn
war crimes
against civilians.***

animals, this God appears to be out of step with some of the most basic rules of war.

Thus says the Lord of hosts: "I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he ambushed him on the way when he came up from Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1 Sam. 15:2-3).

QUESTION #1: If the God of the Old Testament is good, how could He require the destruction of women, children, and animals?

How does a slaughter of infants and civilians square with a Lord who later urged His followers to turn the other cheek, to love their enemies, and to pray for those who had wronged and spitefully used them?

While admitting that such facts are troubling, let's see how the Bible itself might answer a question that questions the ethics of this God.

Toxic Culture.

Archaeological discoveries in Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria confirm the Bible's descriptions of ancient Mideast society. The countless gods of the land reflected the dark side of human nature. Fertility cults institutionalized male and

female prostitution. Child sacrifice was used as a way of pleasing the gods, the chief of which was the sun-god, generally known as Baal or "lord."

Such idolatrous conditions had persisted for centuries, even though the God of Israel had made His existence known through the miracles surrounding the Exodus from Egypt. Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho, acknowledged that her people had known the reputation of the God of Israel when she said:

I know that the Lord has given you the land, that the terror of you has fallen on us For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites And as soon as we heard these things, our hearts melted; . . . for the Lord

*your God, He is God
in heaven above and
on earth beneath
(Josh. 2:9-11).*

The Canaanites had rejected an opportunity for mercy. Although they knew that the God of Israel had revealed Himself and had worked miracles on behalf of His people, they had not embraced Him as the God of creation.

Conditions Of

Conquest. Old Testament records show that God did not, from the beginning, command Israel to kill all the inhabitants of Palestine. Instead, He promised that if His people trusted Him, He Himself would give the Canaanites reason to gradually leave the land.

*I will send My fear before
you, I will cause confusion
among all the people to
whom you come, and will
make all your enemies
turn their backs to you.
And I will send hornets*

*before you, which shall
drive out the Hivite, the
Canaanite, and the Hittite
from before you. I will not
drive them out from before
you in one year, lest the
land become desolate
and the beasts of the field
become too numerous for
you. Little by little I will
drive them out from
before you, until you have
increased, and you inherit
the land (Ex. 23:27-30).*

As we have already seen in the quote of Rahab, from the very beginning of Israel's campaign to conquer the land, God gave the Canaanites reason and opportunity to flee. He made sure they heard about the coming of the Israelites and filled them with terror. Even though, from God's point of view, they had polluted the land and forfeited their right to live in that region, the Lord of the Old Testament gave them an opportunity to retreat. When they chose to

resist the God of the armies of Israel, only then did God demand the destruction of entire communities.

A New Society. Had Canaanite society remained undisturbed, its idolatrous culture would have continued to influence and even shape the region. Yet the God of the Old Testament chose the Canaanite homeland—the crossroads of the ancient world—to promote the values of a new social order. These descendants of Abraham, to whom God had promised the land 400 years earlier, would by their example be “light” to the surrounding nations (Ex. 34:10-17; Dt. 7:1-11; 20:16-18). As no other nation in the history of the world, this land, its people, and its God were to be a source of blessing for all the nations of the earth.

Shock Value. The mission of destroying communities who resisted

should have instilled in Israel a shuddering realization of the consequences of idolatry—especially when that idolatry resisted the truth about God. Fulfilling the role of executioner should have formed in them a healthy fear of God and a hatred of false religion. They themselves would not be exempt from such judgment. They were not “chosen” because God had a favorite family, but to show the whole world the wonderful benefits of knowing the God of gods and the terrible consequences of ignoring Him.

The Perspective Of Time And Eternity. Because we’re 3,000 years removed, we are troubled and even offended at the thought of Jewish soldiers executing the wives and children of frightened and helpless landowners. But the inevitable conditions of time and eternity have their own perspective. If the

lifeless idols of Canaanite culture were at war with the living God, if they were robbing whole communities of the knowledge of life and goodness, then the death of resisters would have sent a message. Without that message, Canaanite culture would have been like an unchecked cancer infecting all who came into contact with this important landbridge to the three continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe.

The premature death of a person looks different through the window of eternity.

Everyone dies. Some pass suddenly with little pain, and some gradually with much pain. Some die young, and some die in old

age. If the Bible's perspective on eternity is true, we can look upon the death of the children of Canaan as better than a long life shaped by the idols of Canaanite culture. Early death kept them from adding one day at a time to the load of guilt for which they would one day be judged (Rom. 2:5).

Even after seeing why God might have required the death of the Canaanites who chose to resist, we may not like what He did. That's understandable. God isn't looking for our fullhearted approval. He knows we can't see the whole of life as He does.

Reasons To Trust.

Although God does not demand our approval, He does call for our trust. Any honest reader of the Bible finds overwhelming evidence of His trustworthiness. He keeps His promises. He makes Himself real to those who seek Him. He has given

us reason to believe that in the end He will right the wrongs of the ages and be fair to all—even with His enemies. His incomprehensible grace and perfect justice will prevail.

Accepting God's Right To Be God. God also calls on us to accept His authority. As the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists, He has a right to declare, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Ex. 33:19). If He is Lord of lords, then it was His divine right to say to the pharaoh who refused to allow the Israelites to leave his country, "For this purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth" (Ex. 9:16).

God could have delivered the Israelites without being so severe. But the path He

chose gave merciful and fair warning to all. In His love, He created an example that was designed to alert every generation of their ultimate accountability to Him. We may not fully understand just why He did what He did, but we have many reasons to acknowledge His right to be God.

A Good Question. But is this also the God of the New Testament? Doesn't Jesus reveal a God who is gentler and kinder? No, the truth is that Jesus simply gave us a clearer picture of the love and gentleness that have always been evident in God's dealings with man.

Jesus said, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Mt. 11:28-

30). His statement echoed the same sentiment as the invitation of the God of the Old Testament who issued the plea, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die?" (Ezek. 33:11).

Yet when the patience of God has run its course, and when a rebel world shows its determination to live apart from submission to His love, the very last book of the Bible reveals once again the judgment of the God of the Old Testament. In close connection with frightening judgments that kill more than two-thirds of earth's population is this awesome endtime scene:

Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place. And the kings of the earth, the great men, the

rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" (Rev. 6:14-17).

God always was and always will be a God of both incomprehensible love and fearsome wrath.

QUESTION #2:
How could an all-knowing God express regret or sorrow over something He had done, as the God of the Old Testament did? This is an important question. If God is always in complete control and if He knows everything in advance, why did He do

some things He later felt sorry for or “regretted”? (Gen. 6:6; 1 Sam. 15:35).

The Meaning Of Words.

Part of the explanation is in the way the Bible uses words. The Hebrew word that is translated “sorry” or “regretted” in these texts does not always mean “being sorry for a wrong done.” The original word occurs 108 times in the Hebrew text. The King James Version translates it “repent” 41 times, “comfort” 57 times, “comforted” 9 times, and “ease” once.

This scope of meaning raises a question. How could the same word be translated “comfort” in one text, and “repent” in another? The answer is that the Hebrew language sometimes operates like English. Depending on context, the same word can have different meanings. A “sharp” picture means something different from a “sharp” knife. Only with a

closer look do we see the grammatical link.

In the case of “repent” or “comfort,” the common factor is “a change of heart.” Just as grieving emotions can be soothed or comforted by the silent embrace of a friend, so an opposite change of heart occurs when God sees the people He created for loving fellowship rebelling against Him, making it necessary for the outpouring of His wrath in judgment.

What is in view here is not that the Lord is admitting to a sin. He is not even saying that He made an honest mistake. He is saying that He is finding it necessary to do something that is causing Him to feel emotional pain.

The Real Emotions Of God. While the Bible presents God as eternal and all-knowing, it also describes Him as emotionally involved with us when what He has eternally foreseen comes

about in actual time. He is not like the emotionally detached gods of Greek philosophy. He loves us so deeply that He shares our sorrow and joy, our pain and pleasure, our failures and successes. He is a personal God with an infinite ability to relate to His creatures. While letting nothing get out of control, He gives us freedom to make moral and spiritual choices. When we choose obedience, He rejoices. When we choose the path of disobedience and rebellion, He grieves.

Referring to the way the nation of Israel suffered because of their sins, Isaiah wrote, "In all their affliction He was afflicted But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit" (Isa. 63:9-10).

Speaking through Hosea, the Lord revealed His emotional turmoil as He thought of allowing rebellious Israel to be conquered by the Assyrians: "How can I give

you up, Ephraim? . . . My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred" (Hos. 11:8).

When God repents, it's not because He has been wrong but because He is too good to ignore our rebellion, and too loving not to care about our plight.

When telling Ezekiel to warn the people of Judah about the judgment that awaited them, He said, "Say to them: 'As I live,' says the Lord God, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?'" (Ezek. 33:11).

In such passages, God shows that though He can see what is going to happen, He still feels our pain and disappointment.

Before He created the world, God foresaw the rebellion that would be mounted by angels and men. He knew what a runaway human race would try to do and how far He would let us go in our rebellion. Yet when fallen human nature had become more demonic than godly, God is described as responding emotionally to what He was seeing:

Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the Lord said, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of

the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them" (Gen. 6:5-7).

For the sake of generations to come, and because of the violence that had filled the earth, God had to judge Noah's generation. Yet He was emotionally moved as He thought of what He had to do. It was to express this reluctance in the heart of God that Moses, the writer of Genesis, resorted to the vivid imagery of a grieving God changing His mind and heart by destroying the race He had created (Gen. 6:6).

Similarly, God was distressed when King Saul's repeated failures proved him unfit to retain his office. Again, God's aversion to taking Saul's position away from him is expressed by picturing Him as regretting that He had selected him for this honor (1 Sam. 15:11).

God was not admitting to a mistake but to the grief He felt in having to move in judgment against the man He had made king of Israel.

God could not send the destructive flood against Noah's generation nor take the kingship from Saul without sorrow and reluctance. And we can be assured that He has the same feelings today when His integrity makes it necessary for Him to bring judgment on the disobedient or rebellious.

The real emotions of God show His authentic involvement with us. Because of His infinite ability to relate in actual time with an unlimited number of people, His changes of heart are not limited to what we usually think of as repentance or regret. That is why the Old Testament also says:

God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son

of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? (Num. 23:19).

QUESTION #3:
If the God of the Old Testament is good, how could He have allowed sin to enter the world in the first place?

If God is good, there must be a reason to believe that it was His love that gave man an opportunity to choose evil. We must be able to believe that it was better for the Lord of the Scriptures to let us choose between good and evil than to have given us no choice at all.

Permitting evil for the sake of good may be interesting to think about in a classroom. But in a hospital room, the thought of God allowing those He loves to suffer so terribly can be a

difficult test of our faith. A heartbroken mother may ask, “How can God’s glory and my good be advanced through the birth of my severely handicapped baby?” A loving and devoted daughter may ask the same question about the prolonged existence of her mother suffering from Alzheimer’s. People living in dire poverty with no foreseeable hope for a change may wonder why God thinks human deprivation honors Him or enhances their ultimate good.

The Alternative. These are difficult questions, and perhaps the best way to answer them is to consider the alternative—a world in which no one could ever make a moral or ethical decision. Could we be happy? Maybe. But something would be missing in our love. Something would be missing in our work. Something would be missing in our worship. We

might not even understand what was missing. But words like *honor, courage, faithfulness, hope, love, and character* would not mean what they mean to us now.

The profound value of choice is not easily grasped. Yet, the capacity to choose between good and evil is the source of immeasurable character and enthusiasm for life.

***Character grows
and relationships
deepen in the
presence of
real choice.***

Think again about the events of the first three chapters of Genesis. Undoubtedly, we would all have been spared a great deal of suffering and grief if our first parents had never sinned. And we would all have somehow shared in the

good choice of Adam and Eve if they had refused to eat from the forbidden tree. But we gain nothing by speculating about what might have been. The fact is that a loving and all-wise God gave our first parents a “moral option,” even though He knew they would fail and that through their failure He could bring the greatest glory to His name and greatest good to us.

The Freedom To

Choose. Let’s take a step back and look at the bigger picture. In the view of the Old Testament, Satan spoke a profound half-truth when he told Eve that by eating the forbidden fruit she and Adam would be “like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). What does that mean? How does God, being good, “know” evil?

We must conclude that God “knew evil” in that He foresaw the prehistoric sin of certain angels (alluded to in

Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:11-17) and also the sin of the human race. This foreknowledge gave Him an experiential knowledge of the difference between good and evil. Even though He never sinned, He saw and experienced in eternity all that would follow. So before the beginning of time, God knew what it was to be angry, disappointed, and grieved because creatures He loved would choose the path of rebellion and sin.

What Satan didn’t tell Eve was that man’s knowledge of good and evil would play out differently than God’s knowledge. The adversary didn’t warn our first parents that the weight of knowledge that God could carry by wisdom would become a terrible overburden to the children who would have to bear this burden of “knowledge” in foolishness.

Was it moral for God to allow such risk? Was it right

for Him to let our first parents be so ignorant about something they never would have done if they had known better? What we know for sure is that He did it to give us the freedom to choose. And in the process, He used our foolishness to show us something wonderful about Himself.

The Provision Of Grace.

God used our loss to show us something about Himself that is priceless—His mercy and grace. Undoubtedly, He could have shown His kindness and love in a world without sin, but not to the degree that He can in our fallen world. God took the occasion of our moral rebellion to show us something that can be seen only from the depths of our guilt and need. Who could appreciate the extent of God's goodness and compassion more than those of us who know that we have been condemned by our own

sin? Who could value the self-sacrifice of God more than those who realize that if it were not for God's offer of the cross of Christ we would have no hope?

If the God of the Old Testament were out of step with the God of the New, then certainly the New Testament writers would have taken issue with a God who would allow such evil into our world. But the Gospels and the Epistles of the New Testament raise no doubts about the goodness of the God of Moses. Instead, the New Testament describes how God is able to take even what is terrible and turn it around for good:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And

not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us (Rom. 5:1-5).

Here in one passage, Paul described a God who is able to weave the pains of a fallen world into the fabric of our lives. He uses pain and sorrow to build moral and spiritual qualities into our lives that will enrich us for all eternity. And all the while, He shares in our grief and misery.

QUESTION #4:
Doesn't the Old Testament portray a primitive God whose impatience is inconsistent with the teaching of the New Testament? Let's look at

one example. When the God of Israel snuffed out the life of a man named Achan, He did something that many would consider uncharacteristic of the God of the church.

Sudden Death In The Promised Land. Swift judgment struck Achan shortly after Israel came into the Promised Land. After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, the people of God had arrived in the land of milk and honey.

It was following the dramatic conquest of Jericho, the first walled city in Israel's path, that Achan broke God's rules. He looted the city of Jericho and hid the forbidden valuables in his tent. The Old Testament describes God as being so displeased with Achan that He allowed 36 Israelite soldiers to die in an attack on a neighboring town. Then God exposed Achan and demanded that his family

and animals be stoned to death (Josh. 7).

Twentieth-century readers might see in this account the kind of fear-inducing God who is beneath the dignity of the New Testament God of love. Yet, we need to be careful that we don't jump too quickly to our conclusions. If you think about it, the death of Achan's family finds a noticeable echo in the early life of the church.

Sudden Death In The Church. The birth of the church on the Day of Pentecost is recorded in Acts 2. Soon after, we read of the tragic end of a husband and wife named Ananias and Sapphira. God struck both of them dead for lying about money they had concealed from the church. The result was that great fear spread among the newborn church.

A certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession.

And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things (Acts 5:1-5).

The rest of the story is that 3 hours later Ananias' wife Sapphira came home, was asked the same question by Peter, lied in the same way her husband did, and she too immediately fell

dead. The result was the same as when her husband had died: “Great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things” (v.11).

There is a lot we don't know about both stories, but it seems clear that in the earliest days of the church the God of the New Testament took an opportunity to do just as He had done when leading Israel into the Promised Land. In both cases, God made an example of deceptive individuals to show that He is a God who deserves not only to be loved but feared as well.

The clearest evidence of continuity, however, can be found in the last book of the New Testament. Those who believe that the God of the Old Testament is primitive, angry, and violent, and that the God of the New Testament is mature, loving, and patient have only to

read how the Bible ends. No book of the Old Testament contains more anger and violence than the book that describes God's judgment of Israel and the nations of the last days. The following excerpt represents only a few lines from a book that shudders with the promise of judgment:

The kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?” (Rev. 6:15-17).

We can take issue with the God of the Old Testament. We can say that

He was too angry, too violent, and too demanding. But what we cannot do is reasonably argue that the God of Israel is made of different character than the God of the church.

In both periods, God chose representative moments to show His people that He is a God who deserves to be loved, trusted, and feared. In the Old Testament He shows the same dimensions of character that the New Testament personalizes in Christ.

This is the relationship Christ claimed when He said, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill” (Mt. 5:17).

QUESTION #5:
If God judged the lies of Achan and Ananias, how could He encourage Samuel, the prophet and priest of Israel, not to tell the

truth? The background for this question is found in 1 Samuel 16:2. There God encouraged His prophet Samuel to give a misleading answer so that Saul would not find out that he had gone to Bethlehem to anoint David as the next king of Israel. How does God’s encouragement to mislead square with the passages that tell us God hates lies and that He Himself is sinless? Isn’t telling someone else to lie as bad as doing it yourself?

Yes, telling someone else to lie is as bad as doing it yourself. But before we accuse God, let’s see whether He actually told Samuel to lie.

A Lie Defined. The ninth commandment is: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Ex. 20:16). This law specifically forbids fabricating a false report or telling an untruth that will bring undeserved harm on

another person. Other passages of the Old Testament speak of lies in the sense of dealing in falsehood or denying the truth. Because God wants His people to be known by their honesty, we could conclude that God asks His people never to hide what is factual.

God, however, does not say that it is wrong to be shrewd. King David said to the Lord, “With the pure You will show Yourself pure; and with the devious You will show Yourself shrewd” (2 Sam. 22:27).

When God told Samuel to conceal from Saul the primary reason for his visit to Bethlehem, He was teaching Samuel to be shrewd with a crooked king. God did not tell Samuel to lie. He told him to tell half of the truth. In the process, God shows us that though it is wrong to deny the truth, it is not wrong to deceive those who are evil.

To conceal the truth or cleverly let an enemy draw his own wrong conclusions is not necessarily to lie. Samuel had told the Lord that he was uneasy about going to Bethlehem to anoint Israel's

God's response to Samuel's plight shows that though it is wrong to lie, it is not wrong to let an enemy draw wrong conclusions.

next king. After all, Saul still held this position and would be much offended and very angry if he heard that someone outside of his family had already been chosen as his successor. He likely would have had the prophet-priest executed.

God understood Samuel's predicament. He therefore

told him to take a heifer with him and order the people to prepare themselves ceremonially for a public sacrifice service. Such a service was normally the prelude to a feast. It was probably during the interval, while the preparations for the feast were being made, that Samuel met with Jesse's family and anointed David. To all who were present, the anointing signified only that David was to be a distinguished servant of God. It did not necessarily imply that he would be Israel's next king. This fact was not disclosed at the time, probably not even to David. Samuel did not lie. With respect to the community, he did indeed come to offer a sacrifice. Did Samuel intend to conceal the full truth from Saul? Yes, but he was under no obligation to tell anyone that he had come to anoint David to be Israel's next king.

There are situations when we do have a right to deceive. Have you ever left a light on in your house when you're away to make a potential thief think you are home? Or what about using a sign that reads BEWARE OF DOG to keep intruders off your property? The dog may bark ferociously when anyone approaches the yard, but he may be a pushover for a kind word from anybody. The sign gives a false impression that an intruder will be attacked by a fierce dog. If you have a dog, you're not telling a lie. You are deceiving any potential trespasser. However, if you were to place a sign in your front window that your home was protected by an alarm system that you didn't have, it would be a lie.

To be a lie instead of a justifiable deception, the statement we make must directly say what is untrue,

violate a promise we made, or help us escape an obligation we have.

Therefore, God was not instructing Samuel to lie. He was telling him to make an announcement that would conceal the real purpose of his visit from people who had no special right to know it.

QUESTION #6:
Why did the God of the Old Testament seem to punish more severely certain violations of ceremonial law than He did serious moral failures?

This question may be expanded to say, “The God of the Old Testament seemed more upset when people broke Sabbath rules or ceremonial taboos than when they were guilty of serious moral transgressions. Why did He permit Lot to get away with incest (Gen. 19:30-38) and David to continue as king after his adulterous and murderous

affair (2 Sam. 11), yet order the immediate stoning of a man who gathered firewood on the Sabbath (Num. 15:32-36) and strike Uzzah dead on the spot because he touched the ark of the covenant while it was being transported on a cart? (2 Sam. 6:1-10).

As difficult as these questions might seem, there are answers. Let’s think some of them through. For instance, one way of answering this series of questions about God’s “unevenness” of judgment is that we can make the mistake of taking God’s immediate reaction to a sin as an indication of how much it offends Him. Or we can make the mistake of thinking that God’s immediate responses are an indication of what He will do later. The writer of Ecclesiastes made this observation: “Because the sentence against an evil

work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil” (8:11). We must recognize that in most instances, God delays the consequences of sin. On other occasions, He uses moments of quick judgment to make a point that might otherwise be missed (such as in ceremonial matters that make a statement about God).

Unseen Consequences.

After David committed adultery with Bathsheba, his life seemed outwardly to continue with an appearance of business as usual. The few who knew what he had done may have assumed that God was not going to do anything about his sin. But Psalm 32 indicates that David went through a period of intense mental misery. Second Samuel 12 tells of his repentance, and Psalms 32 and 51 praise God for His forgiveness.

David went through months of inner turmoil that we would be unaware of were it not for these passages. Furthermore, a casual observer would not see the hand of God in David’s life during the following years. A discerning reader of 2 Samuel 13–18, however, would find in the hatred, intrigue, sexual sin, murder, and rebellion that occurred in his later years an indication that David did not get away with his sin.

Delayed Reaction.

The writer of Psalm 73 was troubled because it seemed to him that people who trusted in God had more problems than those who merely trusted in themselves. He was disturbed by the fact that ungodly people often prospered all the way to the end of their lives.

The psalmist’s resentment continued until, during a reflective moment “in the sanctuary of God,” he

caught a glimpse of the final state of those he had been envying. He then wrote:

When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me—until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end. Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors. As a dream when one awakes, so, Lord, when You awake, You shall despise their image. Thus my heart was grieved, and I was vexed in my mind. I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You. Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand. You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in

heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever (Ps. 73:16-26).

When God strikes a man dead the moment he sins, He startles a watching world and helps them see His attitude toward sin. But as far as the sinning person is concerned, the punishment after death is far more significant. It is because God is all-powerful that He can wait until eternity to bring about full justice.

Divine Options.

Sometimes the God of the Old Testament patiently endured His people's stubborn ways, giving countless opportunities for a change of heart. On other occasions He acted quickly, as in the case of Achan who looted Jericho, or Uzzah who was struck dead for reaching out his hand to touch the ark

of the covenant, which was not being transported according to God's specific instructions given to Moses (Num. 4:1-20).

In either case, since He owed no one anything, God consistently maintained His right to exercise His mercy on His own terms. So to Moses He said, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy" (Rom. 9:15). God always has the right to show more patient mercy to some than to others. He has the right to choose between continued mercy or immediate justice.

Eternal Perspective.

If we could see these startling deaths from God's perspective, we would not be troubled by them. If the two men we just mentioned were genuine Old Testament believers, they are in heaven today. How and at what age they died matters little to them now. If they were not believers, their death at that

time kept them from adding to the load of sin for which they will be judged (see Rom. 2:5-6), thus making their eternal lot a bit more tolerable. God saw this clearly when He acted in judgment. From the standpoint of eternity, the time and manner of a person's death can look very different than it does from where we sit.

QUESTION #7:
Didn't the God of Israel sometimes violate His own principle that children were not to be punished for the sins of their parents? Let's look at an example. In 2 Samuel 21:1-14, David asked God why He had withheld rain for 3 years. The Lord told him it was a punishment on the land because King Saul had broken a covenant between the Israelites and the Gibeonites (Josh. 9). God wanted David to make

restitution by giving the Gibeonites what they asked as retribution. The Gibeonites requested and received from David two of Saul's sons and five of his grandsons for execution. Only after Saul's sons and grandsons had died did God send the needed rain. Many people have a problem understanding how God could accept the death of children for the sins of their parents.

Righting A National Wrong. At some unnamed time under King Saul, the Israelites had killed a number of Gibeonites in what appears to have been an unprovoked attack. In so doing, they violated a covenant between Israel and Gibeah made while Joshua was Israel's leader. The wrong done to the Gibeonites had not been addressed by David, and the people of Gibeah undoubtedly felt that he had been remiss in this

matter. They had a right to receive reparations acknowledging the wrongness of Israel's actions.

The offer was a good one. The Gibeonites might have asked for a financial settlement. They were, however, a pagan people and wanted revenge on Saul's family—the execution of seven of his descendants. Given the culture of the day, David had little choice in the matter. He had to honor their ultimatum. This was therefore a case of national restitution, not of God punishing these seven men for their ancestor's sin.

Saul's children were, in effect, casualties of war. They bore not only the burden of a parent's mistakes but also the weight of a pagan society's desire for vengeance.

That God accepted the injustice as an expression of Israel's reparations is difficult to accept. Yet what we need to keep in mind is that the

offer of restitution was right, even if the payment was not fair to Saul's descendants.

God didn't hold children responsible for a parent's sin—the Gibeonites did. We can be sure that on the final day of judgment these children will answer only for their own actions. Saul will

Only in God's final judgment will it be clear that a child is not responsible for a parent's sin.

answer for his sin. Yet, as is so often the case, children often bear the burden of a parent's mistakes. Only in the final judgment of God will all the wrongs of the ages be made right.

Protecting A Reputation. In the larger picture, the Lord used a famine to get David to

protect His own reputation. The leaders of Israel had sworn to the Gibeonites by the Lord God of Israel that they would not kill any of them (Josh. 9:18). The Israelites had broken a sacred covenant made in the name of Jehovah. In doing this, the nation had profaned the holy name of Jehovah before the pagan world. The matter could not be ignored. God wanted to show the Gibeonites that He did not approve of what Israel under Saul had done. It was for this reason that He sent the famine and led David to ask the Gibeonites what they required as restitution.

This is one of the many instances in which God permitted something He did not like in order to accomplish a good end. He undoubtedly felt sorrow as He saw these descendants of Saul executed for a crime in which they had taken no part.

QUESTION #8:
Since the God of the Old Testament admitted to hating some people, how could He be one and the same as the God of the New Testament who taught us to love our enemies?

This question is based in part on the fact that God speaks in Malachi 1:2-3 of loving one brother and hating another.

“I have loved you,” says the Lord. “Yet you say, ‘In what way have You loved us?’ Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” says the Lord. “Yet Jacob I have loved; but Esau I have hated, and laid waste his mountains and his heritage for the jackals of the wilderness.”

The answer to this apparent problem revolves around the cultural Hebrew meaning of the word *hated* in our English translations. When we speak of hating

someone today, we think of intense dislike and ill will. But that was not the only meaning of the word *hate* in the times of the Bible.

The Old Testament

Meaning. To be hated in Old Testament times might mean only that someone else was loved more than you or was chosen over you for a special role. For example, the Hebrew word that is translated “hated” in the King James Version of Genesis 29:31,33 describes the fact that Leah, Jacob’s first wife, was loved less than her sister Rachel. Genesis 29:30 reads, “Then Jacob also went in to Rachel, and he also loved Rachel more than Leah.” He loved both Leah and Rachel, but he loved Rachel more. His attitude to Leah was not that of dislike. In fact, when Jacob knew he was about to die, he asked to be buried in the family grave, saying, “And there I buried Leah”

(Gen. 49:31). It is obvious that he held Leah in high esteem even though he had a special love for Rachel. To be chosen for special honor was to be loved. To be given a place of less importance or honor, no matter how desirable, was to be hated.

The New Testament

Confirmation. The New Testament confirms that this was the meaning of the term *hated* throughout Jewish history. Jesus said, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple” (Lk. 14:26). Clearly, Jesus was not telling us to dislike our relatives or harbor ill will toward them. On the contrary, He told us to love one another with self-sacrificing love: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (Jn.

13:34). It’s obvious, therefore, that Jesus’ statement that we are to hate our family and friends is a command to give Him first place in our love and loyalty—so much so that *by comparison* it is as if we feel “contempt” for all other competitors.

God loved both Esau and Jacob, but He chose to give Jacob a chosen-people status. For His own purposes, God gave special privileges to Jacob, and also more burden of responsibility.

Question #9:

Why did the God of the Old Testament show preference to men over women?

It’s true that the Old Testament did not give women equal social status with men. A man could divorce his wife, but a woman could not divorce her husband. Women were given a separate place in tabernacle and tent worship. Even in

the ceremonial law, the women had to go through purification ceremonies every month and after the birth of a baby. Moreover, a woman was ceremonially unclean twice as long after the birth of a baby girl than after the birth of a boy.

All of this is true, even though Genesis tenderly describes God as creating woman from the rib of Adam and as a *helper* to him, an honorable word sometimes used of God Himself. Women did not hold an equal place in Jewish society, even though there are noted exceptions and heroes as in the case of Deborah, Esther, and the virtuous woman described in Proverbs 31.

Some of woman's burden, like polygamy, must be considered as a social concession, tolerated by God in light of the times. A woman in Israel was better off than a woman

in other cultures. One scholar notes: "Under the Hebrew system, the position of women was in marked contrast with her status in surrounding heathen nations. Her liberties were greater, her employments more varied and important, her social standing more respectful and commanding" (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. V, p.3100).

We must also remember that we are looking at women through the eyes of our own times when issues of physical strength are often offset by technology. Women living in Old Testament culture did not have such conveniences or advantages. For the most part they lived in nomadic or agricultural society, where the physical advantage of a man gave him an edge in leadership.

Allowing for normal differences in body strength,

there were, however, spiritual factors that also had a bearing on a Jewish woman's status. Even in the New Testament we are reminded that the woman had a role with Adam in the entrance of sin into the race. The apostle Paul said that men and women are mutually dependent on one another (1 Cor. 11:11-12) and that husbands and wives have shared responsibility to respect one another and submit to one another's needs (Eph. 5:21-25). But Paul also described an issue of spiritual headship and order that he linked cross-culturally to creation, the fall (1 Tim. 2:12-15), and even to relationships within the Godhead (1 Cor. 11:3).

The issue of women's status, therefore, cannot be seen as an Old Testament issue that is unrelated to New Testament considerations.

What must be kept in view is that the flow of revelation begun in the Old Testament and brought to fulfillment in the example and spirituality of Christ sees a woman as being different in God's eyes than in that of temporary social

***There are inequities
in our culture and
in society that will
only be resolved in
heaven.***

order and culture. When it comes to the real issues of eternal acceptance with God, the apostle Paul wrote to those who had accepted Jesus as Messiah:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).

HONESTY WITH GOD

In a baccalaureate sermon, Dr. William H. Willimon, professor of Christian ministry at Duke University, used Numbers 13–14 and began with the expected encouragement. But soon he began zeroing in on the God who became angry with the Israelites because of their unbelief, threatened to destroy them, then who changed His mind after listening to an appeal for mercy from Moses. The professor said, “Suddenly, I no longer wanted to preach my little, conventional Power of Positive Thinking sermonette on success. I wanted to preach about a God who was large, prickly, anthropomorphic—a lot like us. I wanted to be in the presence of a God who needed mortals like Moses to go up and reason with Him in prayer to hold Him

accountable to His promises. A God who had feelings and was capable of being hurt by the people He loved” (*Christianity Today*, p.28, Oct. 28, 1996).

The professor made an important discovery. The God of the Old Testament wants to engage our minds and emotions. He wants us to feel our fear and sense of alarm. He wants us to feel the heat of our will pressed against His. He wants us to sense that something is wrong, terribly wrong, terminally wrong. And He wants us to keep asking questions until we find out where that wrong has taken root.

Much of what this God does is to shock us to our senses. The candor of His actions is designed to lead us to an awareness that makes us contrite and humble before Him. That’s where mercy is found. Not by being nice, but by being honest with God.