

An Unchanging God



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Is the God of the Old
Testament the same as the God
of the New Testament?

by Brian Johnston



1. The genocide issue

Have you ever heard people mention how, at God's command, practically whole nations were wiped out in the Bible books of Joshua and Judges? Then they might go on to say that Jesus' New Testament teaching is "Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:43). The conclusion they draw from this is that the God of the Old Testament of the Bible must somehow be different from the God of the New Testament – at least that's how the argument runs.

At first sight, with all the bloodshed we find reported in the Old Testament, the difference does seem too great to be reconciled. It's become a real issue for many, including seemingly strong Bible believers. What's the solution?

Well, we shouldn't do what one man in history did. In the middle of the second century of the Christian Era (AD), a heretic named Marcion declared he no longer accepted the status of the Old Testament: no longer regarded it as being the Word of God, not in its entirety anyway. Its God, he said, was a severe God of law, justice, revenge and war. In his view, Jesus had come to deliver humanity from the regime of such a God of the Old Testament. The Father of Jesus, the God of the New Testament, was a different God, a

God of love and mercy – or so he claimed.

To show you just how slippery a path he was on, let me just mention also that he next began to notice things in the New Testament that he equally found objectionable – and soon he began cutting bits out of that, too!

I hope you can agree with me, that Marcion's solution is totally unacceptable. It's got to be rejected by all Bible-believing Christians who take the Bible to be the inspired Word of God.

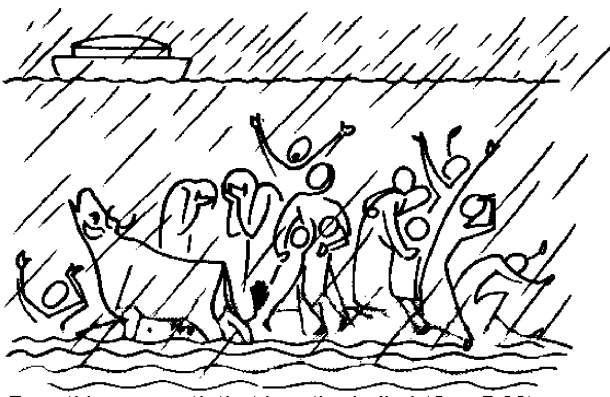
But, in a way, it begins to point us in a more helpful direction, for Marcion began to see that (if you think more carefully about what he was doing) there's actually a consistency between the Old and New Testaments in the God they present to us. That's the only reason why Marcion discovered he had to cut bits out of both the New and the Old Testaments!

I hope we can dispose of the foolish idea that the God of the Old Testament is not the God of the New Testament. Of course, there's a major difference between the Old Covenant with its insistence on animal sacrifices; and the New Covenant made possible through Jesus' death on the cross once for all. The Old Covenant – which was the

agreement God entered into with the nation of Israel - was all about an earthly people serving God in an earthly sanctuary. Because of that, it follows that they had, at times, to go to war in order to defend themselves physically whenever that was necessary.

But under the New Covenant, God's people, made up of disciples of Christ, have their citizenship in heaven. The Bible shows the service they take part in is a heavenly type of service in the heavenly sanctuary. We're talking about something spiritual, not physical now. So, physical violence is forbidden, for the battles are now spiritual. As Jesus said to Pilate, *"My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews"* (John 18:36).

But we commented in opening that there's genocide recorded in the Old Testament when God's people entered finally into the land God had promised to Abraham. They flushed out, or ethnically cleansed, the different populations of the land who



were already there. How can we 'justify' operations like this? And how can we justify the destruction of entire cities like Sodom and Gomorrah; and the devastation of the Flood which extended to everything that was on earth (Genesis 6:17)? Surely these catastrophic events must have involved relatively innocent victims, such as infants?

The simple and short answer is that we can never know enough to 'justify' or 'condemn' such things. In some cases, God gives us a partial explanation: when he tells us about the awful state of society in Noah's time (the earth was 'full of violence'), or the sickening corruption of the cities of the plain, or the detestable practices of the peoples of the land of Canaan.

God told Israel that these nations were to be eliminated because the condition they were in was an offence to him (Deuteronomy 9:5). There was also another reason – their potential to turn Israel away from God to serve false gods or idols.

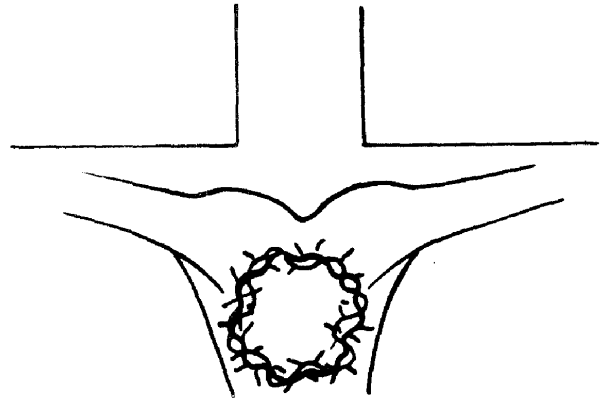
But what about all the infants caught up in such a total destruction? From our limited viewpoint, it seems so hard to understand, doesn't it? But can I give you just one consideration which I think we should bear in mind? There may be more, but I just want to focus on one. Think for a moment about what would have happened to these infants if the described judgement on their society

had not been carried out. Surely they would have grown up and most likely become as evil as their parents, living lives of beastly wickedness and finding themselves eventually in eternal damnation – and all that instead of dying in infancy, covered by the sacrifice of Christ. Take it a step further, and we could even speculate about how likely it was that the unclean practices of decadent societies had already resulted in a high proportion of seriously diseased or weakened offspring, etc., etc. ...

But such conjecture is only speculation because we basically can't know the answer to these kinds of far-reaching questions, and why should we? For we can be confident that God in his wisdom and compassion gets all the balancing factors right, so that in the end there's no injustice in it. As Abraham said about Sodom: *"Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"* (Genesis 18:25).

In the case of every one of us, God decides when our lives will end, and we've no automatic right to live any longer than that. What's more, he doesn't need to explain to us why he takes away one life long before another. But we can be sure his way is best, even when it gives us pain.

But there's even more of a mystery involved in the cross of Christ. Think about it. For here we're talking about God's ancient people again – or at least their rulers - who were this time



totally out of step with God's purposes. But by opposing these purposes they actually fulfilled them by having a truly innocent man executed, one in whom even Pontius Pilate could find no fault (Acts 13:27). Much more than that, in fact, this was the sinless Son of God dying for us. And God allowed it; what's more, he planned it. In his majestic sovereignty God used the sheer malice that was vented against Christ, his son, to bring about the most wonderful good, way beyond what we can even now imagine.

The balancing of factors we talked about earlier was here performed by God in the most extreme of all possible circumstances. God did his best through humanity doing its worst. They meant it for evil, but God meant it for good (compare Genesis 50:20).

Was there any unnecessary evil at the cross? God certainly used evil – meaning human wickedness – in order to defeat it. As the Bible says, *he makes even the wrath of man to praise him* (Psalm 76:10). The Lord Jesus Christ was delivered into the

power of darkness that we might be delivered from the power of darkness (Colossians 1:13).

We've got to allow this to put all the issues surrounding those Old Testament genocides into perspective. For if we can accept what was really going on at the cross of Christ, we will not be able to find fault with these Old Testament

judgements – we'll simply have to conclude that God can be totally trusted. If he can bring perfect justice and such gracious blessing out of humanity's darkest hour – when the world's greatest ever atrocity was perpetrated – then the perfect balance of all factors in all his other judgements can be totally trusted too.

2. New Testament wrath, curses and eternal judgements

In 1977, at the height of the Cold War, Anatoly Sharansky, a brilliant young mathematician and chess player, was arrested by the KGB for his repeated attempts to emigrate to Israel. As a result, he spent 13 years inside the Soviet Gulag. From morning to evening Sharansky read and studied all 150 psalms (in Hebrew).

His wife said: "In a lonely cell in Chistopol prison, locked alone with the psalms of David, Anatoly found expression for his innermost feelings in the outpourings of the King of Israel thousands of years ago."

It would seem then, that Sharansky found relief for his spirit in the cries for vengeance and destruction of the enemy to which David at times in his psalms gives vent. But sometimes we hear the objection raised – shouldn't a Christian, blessed with New Testament teaching, rise above all this in a mature attitude of forgiveness? Should certain psalms not be confined now to a bygone era, because their content is unworthy of a true follower of Christ? This

question about the psalms cuts to the heart of the issue we're exploring together in this booklet – that of the apparent difference some people have claimed to detect between attitudes expressed in the Old compared with those in the New Testaments – and this is then taken to reflect on God as if some change must have taken place – despite the fact that God himself says, *I the LORD do not change* (Malachi 3:6). But the view is so troubling to some that I trust you'll bear with me as we deal with the problem of the so-called imprecatory psalms – meaning psalms which call down a curse upon the head of the enemy, often expressed in very graphic language.

The author C. S. Lewis once got to thinking about the psalmist's spirit of vengefulness. He contrasted it with statements in the New Testament like 'love your enemies'; 'forgive them, for they know not what they do'; and came to the opinion that 'the reaction of the Psalmists to injury, though profoundly natural, is profoundly wrong'. He went as far as to use words like 'barbaric' to

describe their sentiments.

But the problem with his view is that New Testament authors themselves quote approvingly some of these same cursing psalms. For example, Peter applied one of the curses of Psalm 69 directly to Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of Jesus (Acts 1:20). And the Apostle Paul took up the curse: *May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever* and applied it to unbelieving Israel. So, the cursing psalms cannot be so easily dismissed in the way C.S. Lewis and others have attempted – by dismissing them as some pre-Christian sentiment.

We would be better served - in this connection at least - by following another author, the contemporary Christian writer, Philip Yancey. He reminds us that the cursing psalms are prayers. That's a very good point and it makes all the difference to how we should regard the curses. Because the psalmist was praying when he said those things, he was, in effect, placing vengeance in the proper hands. The psalmist expresses his outrage to God, and not to the enemy. Far then from being a pre-Christian sentiment, these prayers offer a model for how we should deal with evil and injustice. They show us the best way is not by suppressing our sense of outrage at evil; and most definitely not by taking justice into our own hands, but instead by delivering

those feelings – stripped bare as it were – to God.

As the books of Job, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk clearly show, God has a high threshold of tolerance for what's appropriate for us to say in prayer to him – and by taking these expressions of ours to God in this way, they can, if necessary, be corrected.

Philip Yancey, after struggling to understand these psalms, ends up saying:

'I have made it a weekly practice, on a long walk on the hill behind my home, to present to God my anger against people who have wronged me. I recount all my reasons for feeling unfairly treated or misunderstood, forcing myself to open up deep feelings to God (does God not know them anyway?). I can testify that the outpouring itself has a [healing] effect. Usually I come away feeling as if I have just released a huge burden. The unfairness no longer sticks like a thorn inside me, as it once did; I have expressed it aloud to someone – to God.

Sometimes I find that in the process of expression, I grow in compassion. God's Spirit speaks to me of my own selfishness, my judgemental spirit, my own flaws that others have treated with grace and forgiveness, my pitifully limited viewpoint.' (The Bible Jesus Read).

In the final Bible book of Revelation we see a preview of a time when the

most extreme of the cursing psalms will come true. The anti-Babylon rhetoric of Psalm 137 will find fulfilment in a time yet to unfold. In Psalm 137, the psalmist had said,

How blessed will be the one who repays you with the recompense with which you have repaid us. How blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones against the rock.

The city and nation of Babylon has had a cruel history as an oppressor of God's people, but pay-back time is coming as recorded in the eighteenth chapter of Revelation: *Babylon, the great city, [will] be thrown down with violence and will not be found any longer* (Revelation 18:21). Have no doubts about it: justice will reign absolutely some day, and bringing that about will require a time of devastating violence against evil. But God is in control (the God of the New Testament, the same as the God of the Old Testament) as always, at the end of history. No punishment will be greater than is truly deserved.

Punishment and vengeance is also the subject of the opening of the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians which opens like this:

Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We ought always to give thanks to

God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater; therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.

This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering.

For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed - for our testimony to you was believed. (2 Thessalonians 1:1-10)

This section of Paul's letter is dealing, not with Christ's any-moment return for his Church, but with his full return to the earth in judgement some seven years or so after that. The difference between

the two phases of Christ's Second Advent is clear because of the heavy accent of judgement here – so different from the section in First Thessalonians 4 which is often read at a Christian burial service. But the main point for our present purpose is again to emphasize the stern warning of judgement found here in the New Testament. The idea that somehow the Old Testament is all about gory judgements but the New Testament by contrast is all very comforting about love – is just that: a foolish notion, which can only be the result of a superficial reading of the Bible.

Nor should we be surprised to find such a passage as that one of Paul's,

for the Lord Jesus is recorded time and time again in the Gospels talking about the sober reality of eternal punishment. Yes, he, the kindest and truest of men had more to say on judgement than on love. And, please note this, whereas the judgements of the Old Testament were summary, temporal judgements (e.g. 2 Kings 1:10); these judgements of the New Testament spoken of first by the Lord himself, then by the Apostle Paul, are eternal judgements. Paul's letter to the Romans begins (for the first three chapters) with repeated references to wrath. If anything, it reminds us that the fear of God should feature prominently in our preaching.

3. The tenderness of a lover

When you hear people say that the God of the Old Testament seems to be different from the God of the New Testament, they usually bring up some Bible verses in an attempt to support their case.

In case you're not quite sure what I mean, here's an example of what might be said. In the Old Testament 42 youths who are mocking Elisha the prophet are torn in pieces by two bears, because God hears Elisha's prayer calling a curse down upon them (2 Kings 2:24). However, by way of contrast, in the New Testament, the very Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, didn't curse, threaten or revile his tormentors (1 Peter 2:23) even while they were nailing him to a Roman cross.

How can we explain such a difference? Can it really be true that the God of the Old Testament is a God characterized only by vengeance and totally lacking in any tenderness – as some seem content to claim?

In this chapter, we aim to show that's definitely not the case, by taking the example of the prophet Hosea. At the beginning of Hosea's ministry, God told him to marry – and then explained it was to be a relationship characterized by

infidelity on the part of his wife, Gomer. Why should God ask him to do such a thing? Because it was to be a relationship which reflected the unfaithfulness of the nation of Israel in terms of its covenant with the Lord (cf. 2:2-23).

God also told Hosea to take children of unfaithfulness. Children who were born in the context of Gomer's infidelity – but, most likely, not as a direct result of it, although we can't be sure. Here are the Lord's precise words to Hosea in any case:

When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD."

So he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

And the LORD said to him, "Call his name Jezreel, for in just a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel."

And on that day I will break the bow of Israel in the Valley of Jezreel."
(Hosea 1:2-5 ESV)

Even the names God chose for Hosea's children were reminders of the broken relationship between the Lord and Israel - and pointed ahead to God's judgment. The first child, a son, was called Jezreel. At this point the significance of his name was not because it means 'God sows', but its significance lay in its association with events which had taken place, or which still would take place, at Jezreel (cf., however, v.11; 2:22-23). After all, Jezreel was the site of Jehu's ruthless massacre of the house of Ahab (1:4; cf. 2 Kings 9-10). And, also, in the future, it would be the scene of Israel's military downfall (Hosea 1:5). But then, in a remarkable change of tone, the Lord begins to say that the effects of judgment will someday be reversed. But is it not impressive that God's judgement here is connected with a place meaning 'God sows'? It indicates, does it not, that God's judgement on his chosen people was not an end in itself, but was intended to bring about their recovery. They were to reap the benefits after God had sown his judgement. The message of Hosea is full of hope for us, particularly if we feel the Lord's disciplining hand has been against us. Perhaps the more accurate application of the imagery of God sowing is one which sees God sowing the people again after he has reaped or harvested them in judgement. Either way, the result is the same - when God disciplines us, he designs that we benefit from it. Beyond

discipline, recovery and restoration are in view.

As we've already said, Hosea's relationship with Gomer was designed to reflect the Lord's experience of being rejected by his covenant people, Israel. In the second chapter of Hosea, the Lord describes this rejection in detail, by continuing to compare Israel to an unfaithful wife - one who chased after other lovers. And even as he confirmed the nation's guilt, the Lord also confirmed that punishment was on its way. Not that that judgement would be final: God intended to draw Israel back and restore their relationship - which is the point we were making about the Lord 'sowing in judgement'.

Israel's relationship with her God is being compared to marriage, as symbolized in Hosea's own marriage, with the Lord being the husband, and Israel the wife. The Lord's wife, Israel, by her unfaithful behaviour, had for all practical purposes broken off the relationship with her husband, the Lord. Rather than exercising his legal right to have such a sinning wife executed (cf. Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22), the Lord here issues a call for repentance, urging the nation to abandon its adulterous activity. What's so special in the book of Hosea, is the surprisingly tender way in which God does this. In that second chapter, God says this - and please note carefully the choice of language:

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

"And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me 'My Husband' ... And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD.

"And in that day I will answer, declares the LORD, I will answer the heavens, and they shall answer the earth, and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel, and I will sow her for myself in the land. And I will have mercy on No Mercy, and I will say to Not My People, 'You are my people'; and he shall say, 'You are my God.'" (Hosea 2:14-23)

In order to make sense of that last verse we read, we should point out that Gomer, Hosea's wife, had borne him two more children, and their God-given names were 'No Mercy' and 'Not My people'. In each case there was an obvious message of judgement delivered to the people of Israel – God was going to show no mercy, and would reject Israel from being his people. But after this judging, there was a promise of hope

for the future. For God would once again have mercy on Israel and take them back as his people once more.

Yes, even at the point of issuing his judgements upon Israel, God promises that one day he would take the further step of restoring the relationship, and Israel's positive response would bring about the renewal of the covenant and its blessing.

In the verses we've just read, the Lord promises he'll make the first move towards being reconciled with his wayward wife. He even tells us how he would do it – by alluring her. In the Bible, the same word refers to behaviour that's tender, that's passionate, full of romantic overtures. Elsewhere in the Bible, the same word is used to describe a man's seduction of an unattached young woman (Exodus 22:16), as well as a lover's attempt to entice a man – Samson, in actual fact – who was allured by Delilah into divulging confidential information (Judges 14:15; 16:5).

When you think of it, this is astonishing language to be used about God's behaviour! It's a daring kind of portrayal of the passion of God – a passion, which although totally pure in this case, doesn't hold back from any act for the sake of the one who's loved with such passion and intensity.

The Lord says he'll lead Israel into the desert, into a place where she'll be completely separated from past

lovers and so she would be able to concentrate fully and exclusively on his advances. The mention of a desert setting like that, makes us think of the time when Israel had once before loved her God with the devotion of a new bride (Jeremiah.2:2-3). According to Hosea's message, the desert would become the site of his romantic overtures to her. There he'd speak tenderly to her – or quite literally would 'speak to her heart'. It's a form of wording that refers to gentle, encouraging speech, such as a man might speak to the woman he wants to marry (cf. Genesis 34:3; Ruth 2:13).

After that, the restoration of the Lord's marriage to Israel is described in terms of a betrothal or engagement. It's language that suggests a new beginning, with all the freshness of first love, rather than the weary patching up of differences. It will be as though the Lord and Israel had returned to the early days of courtship. Of course, such an engagement in ancient Israel was much more binding than engagement is in modern westernized society. The Law in those days treated an engaged or

betrothed couple as though they were legally married, but just not yet living together (Deuteronomy 20:7; 22:23-24). At the time of the betrothal the man would pay a price to seal the agreement (cf. 2 Samuel 3:14). Now, it's interesting here to see what the Lord's own price is. It consists of righteousness ... justice ... love ... compassion, and faithfulness. Are these not the ideal qualities to bring to any marriage? I think every young couple contemplating marriage would do really well to think carefully about this verse, and ask themselves how they measure up to it.

Now, may I ask, does that description of God's actions in going after the one who had rejected him – with all its description of how he, in effect, courts her as a man courts a woman – does that sound like a God without any hint of tenderness? Of course it doesn't! But this is the God of the Old Testament! Does it not help us to see plainly that there's no truth in the idea that the God of the Old Testament is altogether stern and judgemental; whereas the God of the New Testament is all-loving and kind?

4. The tenderness of a father

Sometimes there's the most tender of hearts behind actions which, on the face of it and with our very limited knowledge of all the facts, might seem crushingly severe. For example, imagine a child bewildered because he's just been smacked by his parent for running into the path of a car. Or imagine listening to a father shouting at an alcoholic mother for her own good.

Now add to those, the biblical example that's found in the writing of the prophet Jeremiah:

*"A voice is heard in Ramah,
Lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
She refuses to be comforted for her
children,
Because they are no more."*

Thus says the LORD,

*"Restrain your voice from weeping
And your eyes from tears;
For your work will be rewarded,"
declares the LORD,*

*"And they will return from the land
of the enemy.*

*"There is hope for your future,"
declares the LORD,*

*"And your children will return to
their own territory.*

"I have surely heard Ephraim

*grieving,
'You have chastised me, and I was
chastised,
Like an untrained calf;
Bring me back that I may be
restored,
For You are the LORD my God.
'For after I turned back, I repented;
And after I was instructed, I smote
on my thigh;
I was ashamed and also humiliated
Because I bore the reproach of my
youth.'*
*"Is Ephraim My dear son?
Is he a delightful child?
Indeed, as often as I have spoken
against him,
I certainly still remember him;
Therefore My heart yearns for him;
I will surely have mercy on him,"
declares the LORD.*

*"Set up for yourself roadmarks,
Place for yourself guideposts;
Direct your mind to the highway,
The way by which you went."
(Jeremiah 31:15-21)*

The Bible prophet, Jeremiah, pictures Rachel weeping for her children. "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children". Ramah was a town five miles north of Jerusalem, and Rachel was Joseph

and Benjamin's mother – with Joseph being the father of Ephraim and Manasseh, who became the two major tribes in the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

So, Jeremiah was picturing the weeping of the women of the Northern Kingdom as they watched their children, Rachel's children – in other words, the Israelites – being carried into exile in 722 BC by the Assyrians. [In fact, Jeremiah might have even had the later (586 BC) deportation of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, also in view, because Ramah would also be the staging point for Nebuchadnezzar's deportation of them (cf. 40:1)]. But, in all likelihood, these women were crying because they'd never see their children again. But as the women wept for their exiled children, God offers a word of comfort and consolation through his prophet, Jeremiah. There was hope for their future because their children would return to their own land. God would bring about a restoration.

God called on the captives to set up road signs and guideposts as they travelled to Babylon so they would remember the road they had taken. They would need this information in order to return to their towns at the time of the promised restoration. Restoration would come about because God would work in the heart of the Israelites to cause them to be sorry for their sins. Jeremiah records Israel's – or Ephraim's – cry for forgiveness like that of a son

ashamed and humiliated before his father because of his sin.

Ephraim says after he'd turned away from God, he repented. He was brought to his senses by suffering. He says, "I smote on my thigh" – a sure way in those days to express sorrow. And he goes on to speak about the shame he'd brought upon himself because of the sins of his youth.

Moved to compassion by Ephraim's cry, God shows himself as tender, ready to forgive as a parent is ready to forgive his or her darling child. God says, whenever he speaks about his act of disciplining Ephraim, his son, that his bowels are troubled – that's the literal meaning of the words, and it's language that's meant to reveal the very deepest, internal emotion. It's a picture of the heartbroken, grief-stricken God who hates the sin, but loves the sinner.

I'd like to suggest that it's hard to think of anything that could be more tenderly affectionate than this. The ten northern tribes of Israel, who together are called Ephraim here, are represented as being like a son who has acknowledged his misdemeanours – confessing that from his youth up he had been sinning against God. Although his youthful sins had long passed from his memory, the light of God had brought them back to mind, making him really ashamed of them.

It's in this state of repentance and distress that God now sees him; and

says, in effect, "Bad as he is in the sight of my justice – and in his own sight – he's now repentant, and he's precious to me – a child of delights; one in whose conversion I take active delight. I feel nothing towards him but pity and love. He'll be sure to find that I treat him as a father does a returning prodigal son." How wonderful it is to notice that whenever a sinner turns back to God, God ceases to be angry with him!

This section of the Old Testament sits perfectly alongside Jesus' New Testament story of the prodigal son who was welcomed home again by his father after the son had come to his senses, and had returned and flung himself upon his father's mercy while confessing his sins. God is spoken of as acting in exactly the same way in the book of Jeremiah when viewing Israel or Ephraim as his returning, prodigal son.

When he asks: Is Ephraim my dear son? The question seems to anticipate a negative answer. Who would have thought that such an undeserving son should still be regarded by God as a 'pleasant child'? This can only be by virtue of God's 'everlasting love' (Jeremiah 31:3) on the one hand, and by virtue of Ephraim having been 'turned' back to God. So, as a result, he was immediately welcomed as God's 'dear son'. Just as we read the father saying in the Luke 15: "This my son was dead and is alive again."

You remember the details of the story there – how the younger son

had requested his share of his father's inheritance early. No sooner had he received it, than he went far away and blew it all on wasteful, shameful, loose living. But when the money's gone, and there's real hunger in his belly, he decides to abandon his miserable job of feeding pigs. Even the pigs had more to eat than he had! He swallows his pride, realizing his father's servants have it much better than he does now. So, he makes his way back, rehearsing his apology: "Father, I've sinned." He's ready to settle for a simple hut behind the cow-shed, ready to work his hardest – if only his father might be prepared to give him a second chance. He's got no reason to hope his father will trust him. He knows he



totally deserves to be sent packing, to have the door of home slammed in his face. He's just hoping against hope that his father will give him a trial, a chance to earn his trust again. But these thoughts are interrupted because he sees a figure running to meet him. Can it be possible? It's his old dad! He's not angry! His father embraces him passionately, and with red tear-rimmed eyes tells him he's been watching for his return.

Does that kind of reception embarrass you? Does it seem 'over the top'? Surely it's far too generous a welcome for someone who has behaved so badly? Why not put the son on probation? If he behaves himself for 6 months, then – maybe then – he could begin to get some basic pay for his hard work. Even that might be too generous! But wait – this is Jesus' illustration of God's amazing grace. God's grace means he doesn't deal with a repentant sinner in the way his sins deserve to

be dealt with – whatever they've been. The God of the Bible is a God of grace, forgiving grace. That's the story of both the Old and New Testaments. Just compare Jeremiah chapter 31 and Luke chapter 15 for yourself.

Does that description of God's actions in receiving back a son who had been as disobedient as Ephraim had been, sound like a God without any hint of tenderness? But this is the God of the Old Testament as well as the New!

I know of one young man in particular who has claimed he finds great difficulty in reconciling the God of the Old with the God of the New Testament. While I was struggling to think of how to help my friend, these are the sections of the Old Testament that I came across. I hope they are of help to others who may have similar doubts.

5. The tenderness of a mother

On 11th April 1988, a mother, Elizabeth Thomas wrote this about her newborn daughter, Kelly:

'As I write you are 7 weeks old, a very beautiful baby, and unspeakably precious. When you were born it was wonderful to have you. Now, with the news that you are blind, we love you with an even more tender love. I've wept for you, Kelly, these last days, as I've remembered experiences you'll never have. But there's nothing to be afraid of. God will shape you into an exceptional woman. You are very special to us.

'Kelly, I want you to be the best that you can be. Don't ever settle for second best, making your disability an excuse not to be excellent. Many precious things will be withheld from you, but the best will always be there for you. Trust God.

'My sweet child, I love you so much, and I promise to be with you as you grow - in understanding, encouragement, in discipline and in tenderness.'

That's very special. Surely a mother's love can claim to be one of, if not the purest form of human love there is. A devoted mother loves her son or daughter regardless of their

appearance or achievements, believing that her mission is to send them into adulthood knowing that at least their parents accept them for who they are. Happy is the child who's secure in his or her parents' love. They will probably be able to cope with most, if not all, of what life throws at them.

In the Old Testament of the Bible God wanted his people to know that he loved them, truly loved them. The trouble is, we, like they, might not always recognize true love when we see it. The Old Testament record of God's dealings with his people contains periods of discipline, when God at times punished them severely. But even his disciplines are full of love. The saying is proverbial in the Old Testament:

*My son, do not reject the discipline of the LORD
Or loathe His reproof,
For whom the LORD loves He reproofs,
Even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights.*
(Proverbs 3:11,12)

In the previous chapter we reminded ourselves of the pain God tells us he felt when disciplining his people. But there was no more loving thing he

could have done. Some are confused by the severity of God in the Old Testament – to the point of thinking that the God of the Old Testament must be different from the God of the New Testament. But I'd like us to see that in the measure there's severity in the Old Testament, it's the sternness of a God who is love.

I want to take you to the Bible book of the prophet Isaiah. Here was God's message to his people after one of those times of disciplining. The message says:

*Shout for joy, O heavens!
And rejoice, O earth!
Break forth into joyful shouting, O
mountains!
For the LORD has comforted His
people
And will have compassion on His
afflicted.
But Zion said, "The LORD has
forsaken me,
And the Lord has forgotten me."
"Can a woman forget her nursing
child
And have no compassion on the son
of her womb?
Even these may forget, but I will
not forget you.
"Behold, I have inscribed you on
the palms of My hands;
Your walls are continually before
Me." (Isaiah 49:13-16)*

That's special – God says: 'Can a woman forget her nursing child ... but I will not forget you'. God's love goes beyond a mother's love. Think again of the tenderness of this Old

Testament picture of a loving God. A God whose love exceeds the characteristics of a mother's love.

We began this chapter with the story of the love of Kelly's mum. Her special, tender pledge of lifelong love to her blind newborn baby. Despite the disappointment of the handicap of being born blind, Kelly was to know the fullness of her mother's love.

And God in his Word, the Bible, compares himself to a mother; compares his love to a mother's love. It's a love that surmounts disabilities.

That's the wonder of the Bible's message to us. For all our lives are disfigured by greed because we're not always generous and don't always put other people first. Our lives are impaired by impatience and unkindness – who hasn't taken out their frustration by expressing less than kind sentiments to someone who happened to get in our way? Our lives are dysfunctional at times through harbouring grudges and bitter resentment. But God is still prepared to love us and cherish us – and that is really, really special love. The closest we can get to it by way of analogy is a mother's love. God himself suggests that comparison to communicate to us the quality of his love for us.

Every child ought to find acceptance in its parents' love – regardless of their appearance or achievements. In the Bible the Apostle Paul writes to Christians at Ephesus (1:6) and he

describes them as being 'accepted in the Beloved' – in God's beloved son they had found that they were accepted by God.

It's not that God indulges our sinful ways – not a bit of it. Acceptance of who we are, and approval of what we do, are two different things. God loves the sinner, but hates the sin. God loves us so much he had a very special way of dealing with human sin – one which involved himself, in the person of his son, taking our humanity, and dying as a sacrifice on a Roman cross two thousand years ago to pay the penalty we owed to God because of our sins. When we, for our part, turn from our sins, and believe in God's son, Jesus Christ, and what he did for us – we are promised forgiveness, according to the Bible.

And did you know that the word 'forgive' occurs as many times in the Old Testament as it does in the New? Well it does, what's more, Nehemiah, in the Old Testament (9:17), describes God as 'a God of forgiveness'.

But to bring us back to our theme, let me tell you about a debate on the topic: 'What is the greatest question in the world?' In the discussion which followed, the suggestions offered ranged from the tongue-in-cheek: 'Why do you never see a baby pigeon?' ... to the philosophical: 'What is a question?'

But near the end of the debate an older man spoke up – the only one

so far not to have spoken – and that fact may have added to the authority of his voice: he said, "The greatest question for any man or woman is this: 'Am I loved?'" He went on to say a positive answer to the question 'Am I loved?' sustained people in horrendous situations; while a negative reply to the question, 'Am I loved?' meant no amount of money or prestige could bring them happiness.

Interesting. He has a point, and he may well be right. One thing which does point in that direction is the fact that after the September 11th tragedy in New York City, when people began to tell others what their loved ones trapped in the twin towers, had said to them in their final, frantic telephone conversations or email messages, a common theme emerged. Those who received calls from mobile phones from the doomed planes have also told their stories. Others left messages on answerphones.

It was evident that the same three words kept coming up time and time again. Those words did not refer to size of salary or bonuses, nor to the type of car recently purchased or expensive holidays taken. No. Lovers said the same three words to their lovers, husbands to wives, friends to friends and parents to kids: the three words, of course, being: 'I love you'.

When it comes down to it, relationships are more important to

us than anything else on the face of the earth; it's just that with the busyness of life we sometimes don't live as though that's true.

Do you know what is the last message of the Old Testament ...?

The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi.

"I have loved you," says the LORD.

But you say, "How have You loved us?" (Malachi 1:1,2)

Isn't that wonderful? God wanted to tell his people that he loved them, and always had done. But they couldn't bring themselves to believe it – no more than folks today can bring themselves to acknowledge the loving tenderness of the God of the Old Testament.

I once heard a Jewish Rabbi say that he could tell the interviewer what was the middle verse, the middle word, the middle letter of the Old Testament. He explained this curious detailed knowledge he had was because for him the whole of the Old Testament was a love letter from God – then he added, "You know the care with which a person analyses a letter from someone they love – always asking why did he or she use

that word; what's the significance of putting it like that, I wonder? The Bible is God's love letter to us."

God had said it before to his people: *"I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jeremiah 31:3)*. These Old Testament words anticipate what we can read in the New Testament, at the end of Romans chapter 8: *If God is for us, who is against us?*

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? ...

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:32-39)

Happy is the child of God who is secure in the love of God – the God of the Old **and** New Testaments!

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