

A close-up profile of a man's head and shoulder on the left side of the frame. He has dark, slightly messy hair and a light beard. He is looking out over a vast, misty landscape. The foreground shows a rocky ledge. The middle ground is a dense forest of green trees, partially obscured by a thick layer of white mist or fog. The background is a bright, overcast sky with soft, diffused light. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

Does God
Really Love
Us?

Does God Really Love Us?

A contradiction?

“God is love.” *1 John 4:16*.

Many people are familiar with this text from the first letter of the disciple John, and it is often quoted and used in sermons. But when a natural catastrophe brings widespread destruction and loss of life, or a loved one is torn from us by sickness or accident, we tend to question, “How is it possible that a God of love can permit such things to happen?”



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This same clash of thoughts is mirrored in the contrast between an angry and punishing God in the Old Testament and the description of Jesus in the New Testament. While the Old Testament abounds with graphic portrayals of the destruction of God's enemies, Jesus admonishes us to "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." *Luke 6:47*.

This apparent contradiction has led some to conclude that Jesus is the loving Son who appeases the Father whenever He can, but who is not always able to hinder the bursts of wrath that come from an angry God.

Can we know what God is really like? Do we have a reliable picture of Him that we can depend on? And can this apparent contradiction be resolved?

One well-known story from the Old Testament is typical of many others. After centuries of bondage to their Egyptian slave masters, the Israelites are finally given the prospect of release. God demands that Pharaoh let His people go — or He will hit the land with a plague. Since Pharaoh refuses to listen, God hits the country, and the people, harder and harder until they are finally battered into

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submission. This is how most people view the story. But what is the difference between this procedure and the tactics of the mafia? They also use threats and violence to achieve their aims.

“Our dear Father”

The life of Jesus presents us with no such methods; yet Jesus unequivocally maintained that “I and my Father are one.” *John 10:30*. He also told His disciples that they could speak to their heavenly Father as children speak to their earthly fathers:



“For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out,

‘Abba, Father.’” *Romans 8:15*. “Abba” is an Aramaic word that was used to express the close and loving, personal relationship between a child and its father. And in the context of this statement, Jesus makes it clear that there is no fear in this relationship. Is that

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possible when we must constantly be on guard in case of an outburst of anger that would cause instant death? And is it really possible to love someone when we are afraid of them?

A carbon copy of God

After centuries of sin, our concept of God has become very estranged from what God is really like. In fact, God Himself says, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways.” *Isaiah 55:8*.

And this is why God sent His Son into our world. He came to show us what God is really like. Jesus Himself repeatedly confirmed that this was His mission—for example, when He answered the disciples’ request to show them the Father. “Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” *John 14:9*. And on another occasion He said “Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for

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whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner.” *John 5:19.*



Not only did Jesus do what the Father did, He also did it in exactly the same way. Just as an apprentice copies his master in order to achieve the same results, so Christ followed the methods and procedures of His Father. In other words, **if we want to know what God is really like, we need only to look at the life and teachings of Christ.**

A cruel Saviour?

Nowhere throughout the reports of Jesus' life do we find that He applied any form of violence. In fact, when He was urged to do so He showed how

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foreign this was to His ways. On one occasion, Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem when He asked for hospitality in a Samaritan village. But the inhabitants were jealous of Jerusalem and therefore refused His request. “And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, ‘Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?’ But He turned and rebuked them, and said, ‘You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them.’” *Luke 9:54--56.*

On another occasion Jesus was being taken captive in Gethsemane when “suddenly, one of those who were with Jesus [Peter] stretched out his hand and drew his sword, struck the servant of the high priest, and cut off his ear.” But Jesus restored the ear and rebuked Peter. “But Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.’” *Matthew 26:51, 52.*

And to reinforce the lesson, Jesus made it plain to Pilate that His kingdom was established on a very different foundation than that of force. “My

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kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.” *John 18:36*.

And finally, at His own crucifixion, He did not threaten His tormentors with terrible retribution, but breathed words that expressed only the deep desire of His heart: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” *Luke 23:34*. Instead of destroying His persecutors with violence, He let them destroy Him.

With all this evidence before us, we must conclude that God the Father, whom Jesus revealed to us, has the same loving character as His Son.

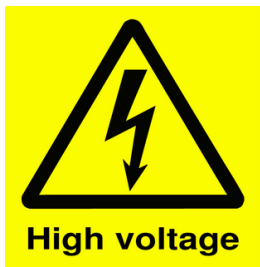
The cause of death

But if this is so, the question that now arises is, “If God does not destroy, what is the cause of death and destruction?”

In order to answer this question we need to consider the inherent danger of power. For instance, let us look at electricity, which brings great

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blessings to humanity. We can cook with it, run computers with it, operate machines, and so on. It would be hard for someone from the West to imagine life without electricity.



But what happens when we do not obey the safety regulations, either accidentally or purposefully? The results can be fatal. If we break the laws that govern these

powers, what can save us from the consequences?

God has also given us other laws that are intended to be a blessing to us and protect us from danger. But if we ignore them, or willfully transgress them, who then can save us?

Is force a solution?

God wants us to obey Him, but only out of love for Him. "If you love Me, keep My commandments." *John 14:15*. If God were to use force, or if it were merely the threat of punishment hovering over our

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heads that led us to serve Him, would we then be able to render a service of love? Would it not rather be a slavish, fearful service? The fall of communism and the current situation in Iraq are only two examples which demonstrate that force does not bring a lasting solution.

God sent His Son into this world that we might see the great love He has for us, and this is the only way He can win our hearts. If force were a solution, then He could have solved the sin problem long ago. But God wants us not only to see His love, He also wants us to hate sin because of what it is. Only this can bring the security that sin will never arise again.

In summary

The life of Christ, and His death on the cross, show that God is not waiting to punish us, but that He wants to save us. It was sin that caused the death of Christ, and it is sin that is responsible for all the suffering, sickness, and death that exists in this world. “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” *Romans 6:23*.

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God does not destroy, but gives life. During His life on earth, Jesus showed us the way of life, and He gives eternal life to everyone who really desires to go this way. He never destroys anyone.

Christ has given us an example, not only that we should look and be amazed, but that we should follow Him and reflect His character in our own lives. In this way, more and more people will understand that “God is love.” *1 John 4:16*.

“I have come to know another God”

I was sixteen years old and attending a summer course in a college in England in order to learn English. One day a young man came to visit. He no longer believed in the Bible, he said. I was both saddened and shocked. He continued, “God is love; He is omniscient and omnipotent—and in the end He destroys all the wicked. That is what is written in the Bible. That does not fit together.” He had hit the nail on the head.

I remember how he later had a discussion with some theology students. His statements were simple and pointed, theirs were complicated and evasive. After he left they continued to discuss the matter, but none of them had an answer.

This event not only occupied my thoughts for the next few months, it remained as a question mark in my mind for years. I often asked other people— young people, laymen, spiritual leaders, my parents—only to be met with the same vague and evasive answers that I had heard from my friends in England. “The Old Testament is not as important as the New Testament.” “Thou shalt

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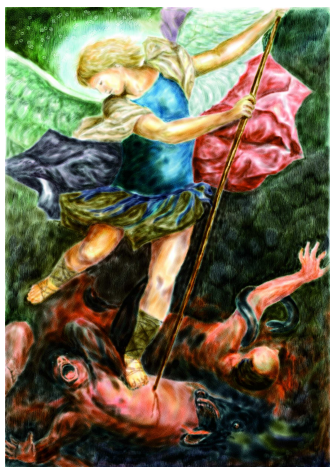
not kill means you should not murder.” “God is not bound by His laws.” And so on.

But the picture remained the same: In the Old Testament a great and powerful God, full of authority, who appears as a tyrant, an evil despot, towards Pharaoh, and who permits men, women, and children to be slaughtered without mercy.

And in the New Testament a loving Jesus who forgives us and does everything for us. This is supposed to be the other side of the coin of God's character. What kind of a Father does this present? On the one hand authoritarian and tyrannical, and on the other hand caring and kind. Is this our God? I could well understand the young man who had turned away from his faith.

Almost ten years later I was discussing faith with a friend of mine. While he was looking for a text in a book, he came across a picture of the archangel Michael with a spear in his hand, stabbing Satan,

who is illustrated as a dark and evil, fallen angel in the lower part of the picture, to death. When my friend said, “I would really like to tear this picture out of this book,” all my questions in regard to



God’s character came up again. This was exactly what was believed in the Christian world—either in this dramatic way or in some milder version.

I put one question after another to my friend and the answers that I then heard were so simple and logical, that a feeling of deep thankfulness rose within me. “God keeps His laws for they are an expression of His character. They are the foundation of His kingdom. He is not a liar, and therefore never

lies. Neither is He a murderer, and therefore He will never kill. He is the same in the Old and the New Testament, for He does not change (*James 1:17*). It is sin which brings death, not God. Calamities and suffering are the result of sin, of separation from God. God gives only life (*Romans 6:23*).”

It is because people did not understand God’s character that He sent His Son to this earth. Jesus shows us how God really is (*John 5:19*). He only did what the Father did, and He did it in exactly the same way. His whole life was a revelation of His Father in heaven. He was never a tyrant who killed sinners. Quite the opposite: He was mocked, beaten, spat on, and finally killed in the basest manner. No, God does not kill—He permits Himself to be killed.

At that time I still had a lot of questions, but I had learnt one thing: The life of Christ, and especially His death on the cross, showed me how God really is—a loving Father who cares for every single person. A Father who does not cover up sin, but does

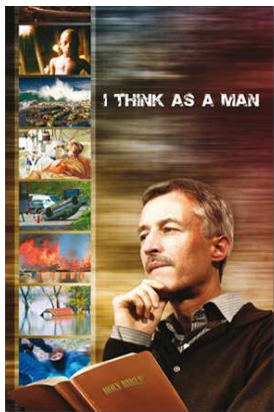
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everything possible to root it out.

Today, many years later, I am more than ever convinced that God does not destroy, kill, or send judgments in the way that we humans often imagine. I have come to know a very different God.

Joachim Schwarz

For more thoughts on this subject we recommend:



F.T. Wright

I Think as a Man

When we are confronted with accidents, loss, human suffering, or catastrophes and even war, our thoughts tend to run in a certain direction. We feel threatened, deeply shocked, or grieved. Whatever it may be, our thoughts are determined by our concept of what part a higher power—the

power of God—plays in all these events. Is the Almighty angry, and punishing humanity for their disobedience? Is His patience at an end and He is using His omnipotence to put a swift end to these wicked practices? Or has the situation simply got out of control?

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