

God's Righteousness Revealed

By Bethany Zimmerman

Editor's Note: This is a paper that my oldest daughter wrote for her 12th Grade religion class at Langley Christian School

READING the Bible every day is a virtue widely aspired to by many Christians, and yet it is always a hard habit to keep. I believe this is, in part, because we do not understand why we need to read it. It is an old book; most English translations are still hard to understand; it is so ingrained into our culture that it no longer sparks our interest.

But let us not forget that this book has been the cause of numerous fights, controversies, and bloody wars. What could be in this book that inspires violence?

As someone who has never felt the threat of war, it is easy for me to argue in favor of a fully non-violent ideology, but there are also some highly influential people who, like me, believe there must be some functionality to those principles if they come from such a great being as God. Gandhi, for instance, as well as Martin Luther King Junior, are two influential leaders who held strong to their convictions of non-violence in the midst of political chaos, both of whom were following the same role model: Jesus.

So, let me start by explaining the way I read the Bible. It is a revelation of God's character. Understanding God's attributes allows us to...

1 John 4

⁷ ...love one another, for love comes from God;

and thus we can conclude:

1 John 4

⁸ God is love.

This is the most important point: "The highest expression

of non-injury is love,” according to Martin Luther King in his speech on the philosophy of non-violence.

So why has this book, which supposedly reveals to us the character of an all-loving God, caused so much hatred and violence? The answer can be found, in fact, in the very first book of the Bible, when the serpent deceives Adam and Eve. He distorts the image of God, convincing the humans that God is not loving, but oppressive. When God’s character is distorted in such a way, it causes rebellion against the law of God (i.e. eating from the tree).

So how can we be sure that the law and character of God is non-violent when God’s destruction is mentioned so many times? What are we to make of this? And what are we to make of hell? What god who is loving and forgiving would damn his people to an eternal, fiery torture? To answer this, we must understand how God ‘destroys,’ what the Bible reveals to us about God’s character, and why Jesus is the ultimate example of God.

In *1 Chronicles* 10:13-14 the death of King Saul is described:

1 Chronicles 10

¹³ Saul died because he was unfaithful to the Lord; he did not keep the word of the Lord and even consulted a medium for guidance,

¹⁴ And did not inquire of the Lord. So *the Lord put him to death* and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse.

He was unfaithful to the Lord, so the Lord killed him and granted kingship to David instead. From this little excerpt, it is easy to conclude that God has no problem killing those who are disobedient to Him, and that violence is how God punishes sinfulness. But how does Saul really die? Just a few lines before it is written,

1 Chronicles 10

⁴ Saul took his own sword and fell on it.

Are we to argue that God forced Saul to take his own life? No. Saul's motivations were entirely his own. It was because Saul had withdrawn from the Lord that he had begun to lose the battle against the Philistines. He feared he would be captured and tortured by the enemy, so chose instead to take his own life. God is a protector, not an aggressor. God rests in His creation, as He did so on the Seventh Day, and:

Colossians 1

¹⁷ In Him all things hold together.

If God is order, then the absence of God is chaos. When Saul was unfaithful to God, he pulled away from God's protection. This was not God's doing; it is a choice He gives all humans. That is why God tells Abraham,

Genesis 18

³² For the sake of ten [righteous people], I will not destroy [Sodom and Gomorrah],

—because His protection is with those who are righteous. However, we should not dismiss the character of God in the Old Testament because He seems too violent. This in itself is a false assumption. The God of the Old Testament is the same loving God as the one represented by Jesus in the New Testament.

Let's start at the beginning again, in *Genesis*. God does not destroy Adam and Eve when they sin and hide from Him. He sends them out of the Garden of Eden, but even this is an act of love and not of wrath or revenge. God protects Adam and Eve from the tree of life, which could now fall into the hands of evil. Can you imagine if the tree of life still existed? There are many people who would sacrifice the life of the whole world to save their own. God did what He had to do to bring order.

We are not naturally inclined to interpret it this way, because our view of God is darkened by our own human nature.

We assume that, because God has power, He must use violence to do His will, as many humans would. This is a fallacy, because:

Isaiah 55

⁸ [His] thoughts are not [our] thoughts, neither are [our] ways [His] ways.

We cannot comprehend the thoughts and motivations of God, so neither can we assume that He would use His power to oppress. Only God Himself can define His character, and in *Exodus* 34:6-7 the Lord passes by Moses (reveals a part of Himself) and proclaims himself as:

Exodus 34

⁶ ...slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,

⁷ Maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

This is God's true character. Although God's true character is described in the Old Testament, it is still easily, and often, misconstrued. So how can we be sure that God is all-loving and non-violent when there are verses that also say He destroys and punishes? This is when we look to the Gospel, which is the ultimate revelation of God's righteousness through Jesus Christ.

Matthew 5

¹⁷ [Jesus] did not come to destroy [the law] but to fulfill [it].

He came to sacrifice himself, not to destroy His enemies. Remember when Jesus was being arrested and Peter picked up the sword to defend his Lord? Jesus rebuked him for the act of violence, because that is not the way of the Lord. Similarly, in *Luke* 9, the Samaritans prevent Jesus from entering a village of the Samaritans, and His apostles ask Him to call down fire upon them. Jesus rebukes them for this, because once again, it is not the way of the Lord.

Even the apostles had a misunderstanding of God's character. That is why Jesus' ministry was so important. He had to spread the truth about God's law so that people could live truly righteous and faithful lives by following His ways. Jesus defines eternal life as 'knowing God,' and in His prayer to God He says,

John 17

²⁶ I have made You known to them.

Through Jesus we come to know God, and through knowing God we are given eternal life.

Although the evidence has been presented, I fear it is not enough to counter that which has been ingrained into the Christian psyche for millennia. The Christian ideology was highly influenced by the classical cultures, Greek and Roman. Both of these prominent cultures had strong notions of the "Underworld." For example, the Greek god Hades ruled the underworld where all souls would go after death. The Catholic Church held on to this idea, which eventually became what we understand to be "hell": the place where bad people go after they die, a treacherous, torturous place. Hell is a concept that lasted even throughout the era of disenchantment, when superstition lost its power.

But what does this idea of hell, that is part of many Christian's foundation of beliefs, communicate to us about the nature of our God? Is He partial to eternal torture and punishment for those who simply "don't believe?" This is a hard question to answer, especially for myself, as I have met many righteous people who do not call themselves Christian. So far, our understanding of "punishment" is that the consequences of sin are not inflicted by God, but by the sinful act itself. In the letter of Jude, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is described as:

Jude

⁷ ...an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.

But we know for certain that the two cities are no longer burning, so it seems “eternal fire” is rather short. In fact, the Hebrew word for “everlasting,” *olam*, is used many times in the Bible where the time period in reference was not “forever and ever.” Conclusively, scripture does not fully support the idea of hell, and neither should it because the idea of hell does not align with a just and loving God. *Romans 6:23* says,

Romans 6

²³ The wages of sin is death,

—meaning not just a physical death, but a spiritual death.

The Law of God provides order to our universe. It is the ultimate law, which has been put in place by an all-knowing, creator God, who has knowledge and wisdom greater than any human could ever hope to have. This law is perfect, and unlike the law of man, it does not permit violence.

It is imperative that we learn this Law from Jesus Christ who revealed it to us, because we know what will happen (and what has already happened) from our observation of history. A lawless and godless world is unprotected and subject to terrible destruction. God wants to continue protecting us from such destruction, but the choice is in our hands whether or not we will cling to Him.

We must know God so that we may have faith in Him, even in the face of death and so that we may love one another as God so loved us.

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