

Thinking About God - 3

God Revealed in the Old Testament

The popular image of the Lord God in the Old Testament is that of a remote and austere deity, finding fault and sending dreadful retribution on those who transgress His laws. This is a travesty of the truth. The Almighty is shown in the Old Testament as a God of awesome majesty who must be approached with respect, but also desiring to be close to His creation, wanting them to love and worship Him.

God Seen in the Law

In the Ten Commandments, given to Moses on Mount Sinai, God sets down principles which are eternal.

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me (Exodus 20:2-3).

This is hardly surprising. Since God created everything, why should people worship anything other than Him? The commandments continue logically.

I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love Me and keep My commandments (v5-6).

Those who are critical of the God of the Old Testament forget that as Creator He has a right to expect that His creation will love and worship Him.

We should take careful note of that little word 'love'. This is the Bible concept of love, a practical quality which is demonstrated through the actions which it prompts. God shows amazing love to those who love Him, He would not wish them any harm at all, and He expects them to show that love in response.

Pursuing the idea of the awesome character of God, this is how He revealed himself to Moses a little later:

The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty" (Exodus 34:5-7).

This gives a much more balanced perspective on the Lord God. He does not clear the guilty, but He is merciful to those who fear and love Him. He is abundant in steadfast love, or mercy, and He forgives those who love Him.

Majesty and Awe

In the book of Isaiah we have a similar picture of the respect which God should instil in those who approach Him. The prophet had a vision of God's glory in the temple at Jerusalem.

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of His robe filled the temple (Isaiah 6:1).

The vision continues like this: *And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for" (v5-7).*

This vision emphasises the holiness and majesty of the Lord God, contrasted with Isaiah's humble recognition of his (and the people's) uncleanness in comparison. But the prophet's desire for cleansing was met with a positive response: an angel was sent to cleanse him. This is a graphic picture of God's generosity in meeting humankind's needs.

Father-like

In other places in the Old Testament we are shown God as a loving Father. At least three of the Psalms use this idea.

As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust (Psalm 103:13-14).

This is a lovely idea, the Lord God who made us wishes to be seen as a father. Fathers do sometimes need to be stern and severe, to discipline their

children and to deal with wrongdoing and misbehaviour. Of course that is only part of what a father does. He also cares and provides for his children, looks for the best in them and helps them achieve their potential.



Having made us, the Lord God 'knows our frame' better than anyone else possibly could. He really does know what is best for us. It is an idea which comes again towards the end of the Old Testament:

Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers? (Malachi 2:10).

So the myth of the Lord God in the Old Testament being harsh and repressive is far from the truth. There is a severity to His character, where it is necessary, but that is not the whole picture. The truth is that the Old Testament presents the Lord God as a God of love, concerned for the well-being of His people and desperately saddened when they go against His wishes.

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Bible Quotations from the English Standard Version