

Why Is God So Violent?

Recently, I was asked why was God so violent and vengeful in the Old Testament and yet so loving and nice in the New Testament? The person said,

I have a friend who is rejecting Christianity because he says the God of the Old Testament is too violent. He cites particular passages such as God wiping out everyone in the flood, except Noah's family; God wiping out Sodom and Gomorrah; the command to drive out the Canaanites and others from the land and completely kill everyone according to 1 Samuel 15:3 (and the corresponding commands and threats in the law like Exodus 23:23 and similar ones in Numbers), the

killing of Canaanites and etcetera in Joshua and Judges. King Josiah killed the Baal priests and idol worshippers in 2 Kings 22. He cites all this as proof that the Old Testament God was too violent to be a God of love as in the New Testament. Then he concludes that the Old Testament must therefore be the work of

power hungry leaders who ascribed God's authority to their own political and racial ambitions. Can you help?

Recently, someone else asked when does God stop loving people and start hating them and why? I believe the answer to these questions is found by a clear understanding of the character of God. That is, these questions are the fruit of a misunderstanding of God's character. We will start with an often ignored fact about God's character and then conclude with an unpleasant but real truth.

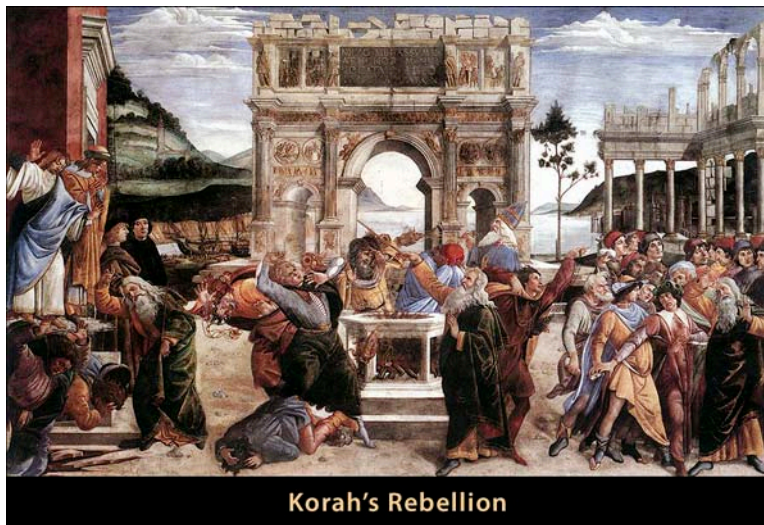
GOD'S CHARACTER DOES NOT CHANGE. Let's start with an Old Testament truth about God in Malachi 3:6

where God declares,

For I, the LORD, do not change . . . Mal. 3:6 (NASB)

Here we discover that God does not change - His character does not change. Whatever He has been, He will always be. Now let's look at a New Testament verse that repeats the same message. The statement occurs in Hebrews 13:8 using different words. But the message is the same. Here is the verse.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Heb. 13:8 (NASB)



It is clear that this verse is not declaring that Jesus always lived in heaven, never came to earth, always lived as a baby, was always a teenager, never died, was never resurrected or never ascended into heaven. The passage is describing

Jesus' character. It is declaring the same message as Malachi 3:6. Since Jesus is God, and Jesus never changes, then God never changes. That is, the Old and New Testaments declare the same message - God's character has not and will not change. God was not one way in the Old Testament and then different in the New Testament. For example, if one assumes that God was violent and vengeful in the Old Testament, then He would be violent and vengeful in the New Testament. What we are going to discover is that God's character did not and does not change with time.

OUR HOLY GOD AND SINFUL MAN. Unfortunately, there is a wide range of viewpoints about how to deal with

sin and evil in this world. Some people think that sinful behavior should just be excused and ignored. The operative word today is “toleration.” That is, we should be willing to tolerate the sins of others, unless it directly affects me or a loved one. Some people believe that there should not be any strong penalties for murder, stealing, or rape, for example. Some individuals think that a nation should never defend itself against another nation. Fortunately, most people do not share that viewpoint. Otherwise, Hitler and the German army would most likely be controlling the world today (We would all be Nazis!)

These examples reveal the increasing tolerance for sin that is occurring in much of our world. Why is this occurring? The Bible reveals that it is increasing because we are sinners and we are comfortable with sin. Here are some verses from the Bible to think about,

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Rom. 5:8 (NASB)

. . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God . . . Rom. 3:23 (NASB)

The first verse says that we are all sinners. That is, we sin and the second passage indicates that we are not like God. We are sinners, but in stark contrast God is holy. That is, He is without sin. We are incapable of understanding such a being since all we have known from birth is sin. We sin because we are sinners and we think like sinners. Our thinking, desires and perceptions are distorted. We are distorted beings compared to Him. But that is not true of a holy God. Consequently, His holiness is obvious in His righteous acts. He shows Himself to be holy.

But the LORD of hosts will be exalted in judgment, and the holy God will show Himself holy in righteousness. Is. 5:16 (NASB)

Our problem is that we think as sinners and not as holy people. Consequently, our value judgments are distorted and flawed. Although people know that certain actions are wrong or sinful, they act sinfully anyway and they encour-

age others to act in the same way - to be like them. Listen to Romans 1:32,

. . . and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them. Rom. 1:32 (NASB)

Not only do we approve of the sin of others, we also evaluate God in the same way. Listen to Psalm 50:21,

**These things you have done and I kept silence;
You thought that I was just like you;
I will reprove you and state the case in order before your eyes.
Psa. 50:21 (NASB)**

In this verse God reveals that we evaluate God as if He was like us. This should not be surprising since we are sinners and we think everyone should be like us. So when God does something that we consider to be unjust, we jump to wrong conclusions and assign our sinful motives to a holy God. Isn't that a common problem? We jump to conclusions about what others are thinking and why they do what they are doing. Some of the time we are accurate. We are accurate because we know how other sinners think. We understand their motives because we are sinners. But God is not like us. He is a holy being. He does not sin. So we have a difficult time understanding Him and His motives, except what is revealed in the pages of the Bible. Even then we do not completely understand because we reinterpret Him through our sinful perspective. In Psalm 50:21 we also discover that God keeps silent about our sin, at least for a while. This truth is echoed in Revelation 2:21.

I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality. Rev. 2:21 (NASB)

God gives us time to repent. He is not eager to discipline us. Therefore, He sends us gentle warnings, but eventually He will discipline those who continue to commit a particular sin or sins.

SO WHY THE VIOLENCE? Now we will explore the question, “Why is there violence in the Bible?” Lets start with a non-violent illustration from Genesis 3. In this passage we are told that Adam disobeyed God (Gen. 3:6-7). Roman 5:8, 12-14 reveals that, consequently, sin entered the world and we became sinners. We are all sinners, including this author. We are sinners because we sin (James 1:13-16) and because we are born sinners (Psalm 51:5). What is sin? Listen to the following passage,

And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them. Rom. 1:28-31 (NASB)

Throughout scripture, we are called to avoid sin and to pursue holiness. As we have already discovered, God gives us opportunity to turn from our sin and to turn to Him, pursuing holiness. So what does God do when we persist in our sinfulness? Listen to God’s reaction to man’s sin just before the flood.

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. The LORD said, “ I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creep-

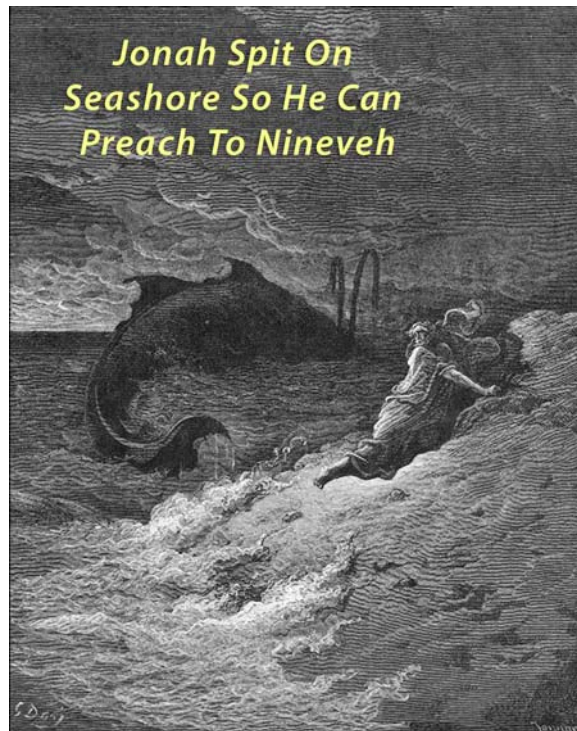
ing things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them.” But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. Gen. 6:5-8 (NASB)

Man’s sin or wickedness is described as having been great. That is, they ignored God and did as they desired. The only recourse that God had was to eliminate them in order to rescue the world. Now many people would not consider this a “loving” act since they would prefer to continue living as they desire. Noah’s contemporaries had a choice, but they ignored God. They could have avoided the consequence. This is a stark contrast between sinful men who love their sin and a holy God who will not tolerate sin. We are willing to tolerate sin but not God. Now one could ask, “Why was there violence in the Old Testament?” The answer is that sinful men were unrepentant. They wanted to continue in their sin. They ignored a holy God. We could also ask, “Why did God deliver godly justice on disobedient people? The answer is that they deserved it. They earned it.

In the Old Testament God directed that certain nations be destroyed due to their sin or evil (1 Samuel 15:3). But God also demonstrated His love when He warned the Ninevites (Jonah 3:1-4:11). When they repented of their sins, God spared them from judgment. In the New Testament He told the Jewish leaders that Jerusalem would be destroyed because they had rejected Jesus Christ (Luke 19:41-44). Then just days later, Jesus died for our sins on a cross so that anyone can have their

sins forgiven. He also revealed in the book of Revelation that judgment is coming upon this world (Rev. 6:1-17), and at the same time He pleads with people to repent of their sins and turn to God (Rev. 14:6-7). Those are all acts of a loving God.

He warns us that we need to repent so that we can escape



coming judgment. He warned folks in both the Old and New Testaments. He also shows His love in both the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament shows us the seriousness and consequences of sin in more graphic detail than the New Testament, but His character is unchanged. God is the same in the Old and New Testaments. He is a God of love, Who because He is also holy judges nations and individuals when they do wrong.

In the Old Testament we see the historical accounts of thousands of years of God's dealing with sinful men and women. God judged wicked and evil nations, but His love is also demonstrated. The New Testament was written over a period of time of about seventy years so the graphic details are more limited but they exist. Consider Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem due to their rejection of Him in Luke 19:41-44 or the apostle John's description of coming judgment in Revelation 6-20. Yet, Jesus had called those who listened to Him to believe and repent and God will do the same during the future time of judgment. That is the act of a loving God who does not want us to suffer.

To conclude that God stops loving and starts hating us or someone else at some point in time is to misunderstand God. God never stops loving us. His character does not change. Malachi 1:2 should never be construed to imply that God hates people. That passage is a statement of contrast between Israel and the nation of Edom. He hated the sin of the nation. God hates sin - mine, yours and everyone's. Yet, God loves us.

CONCLUSION. God is characterized by both love and holiness. We are not loving and holy like God. We are sinful and self-centered. Consequently, our sense of morality and our view of our loving and holy God will always be somewhat distorted. We are incapable of correctly understanding and evaluating our God without turning our lives over to God and allowing the Holy Spirit to change us to be more like Him. Jesus Christ warned us to believe in Him and to give ourselves to Him. Listen,

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. John 3:16 (NASB)

... that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved . . . Rom. 10:9 (NASB)

God tells us that He loves us and that we can have eternal life if we will simply believe that Jesus died for our sins and returned to life. If you want your sins forgiven and to be at peace with God, then ask God to forgive you. Did you notice that we are also to let Jesus be the Lord or master of our life? True belief includes a willingness to let God take control of our lives. One who does not believe and is unwilling to be obedient - or to pursue holiness - does not truly know God. They are not going to heaven. They are going to spend eternity in punishment. That is the consequence of a life of ongoing rejection of a holy God.

God has been and is still lovingly reaching out to each one of us but eventually, and if necessary, He will get our attention by allowing us to fall into a difficult situation. For some people it is divorce, health or some tragedy. I believe that often these situations occur because He stops protecting us and finally allows the consequence of our sin to take place. Then if we continue persist, God may end our lives (1 John 5:16). Our God gives each of us enough time to repent and respond to Him. It is our choice.

God has not changed His character. He has always been a loving God who hates sin and in His justice will bring judgment on sin. The Old Testament illustrates this truth and so does the New Testament, but in less graphic detail.