

The God of the Old Testament

There are some people who claim that the God of the Old Testament was a cruel and vengeful God who punished people for the smallest offenses and destroyed nations left and right. They also claim that the God of the New Testament is full of mercy and love and peace. They believe that God changed at some point and became far more merciful than He used to be.

The problem with this theory is that the Bible tells us God never changes:

Malachi 3:6: “For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.”

If God never changes, but yet people believe that He was more vengeful in the Old Testament than He is in the New Testament, then something is wrong. I'd like to take this opportunity to examine the God of the Old Testament and see what's really going on. I believe we'll find a lot more mercy there than some people expect.

Since we don't have the time to examine every book in the Old Testament I'd like to focus on the book of Jeremiah. That particular book is one of the major prophets. It's a long book that's filled with passages of God's wrath and anger. If there's any book in the Bible that people tend to think of when they picture a God of wrath, it's this one. Take a look for yourself:

Jeremiah 7:32-34: “Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that it shall no more be called Tophet, nor the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter: for they shall bury in Tophet, till there be no place. And the carcasses of this people shall be meat for the

fowls of the heaven, and for the beasts of the earth; and none shall fray them away. Then will I cause to cease from the cities of Judah, and from the streets of Jerusalem, the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride: for the land shall be desolate.”

There's a lot of wrath in those verses, isn't there? God told them that His judgment upon Judah would be so terrible that they would *run out of places to bury the dead*. He said there would be so many dead bodies that they would lie on the ground, unburied, and become food for wild animals! God would destroy Jerusalem so thoroughly that He would *wipe out every last trace of joy and gladness*. That's some pretty severe wrath!

But let's back up a little bit. Jeremiah 7 tells us *what* God was going to do to Judah. It's truly gut-wrenching – but what had Judah done to deserve such awful judgment? If we go back just two verses in that same chapter we'll find our answer. The people of Judah were guilty of committing some extremely terrible acts:

Jeremiah 7:30-31: “For the children of Judah have done evil in my sight, saith the LORD: they have set their abominations in the house which is called by my name, to pollute it. And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my heart.”

The very first commandment (and the greatest commandment of all, according to Jesus Christ) was to love the Lord you God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. The Israelites were commanded to worship God alone and serve no other gods, but they had broken that commandment. Not only did

they worship idols, but they actually set up idols in *the temple itself* – a place that was supposed to be holy and set apart for the worship of God! Not only did they worship idols, but they actually *sacrificed their children* to those idols. Not only did they sacrifice their children to idols, but they actually *burned their children alive as human sacrifices!* These weren't small sins. They were staggering sins, and they had been going on for a long time.

In the New Testament, the book of Acts tells us of a time when Ananias and Sapphira lied about the money they had given to the church, and God struck them dead on the spot for lying to Him (Acts 5). When the nation of Judah began burning their children alive as human sacrifices, did God strike them dead on the spot? Amazingly, no, He didn't. Instead He called Jeremiah to be a prophet and gave him a message to the people – a message to stop their sins and repent. If the nation repented of their sins then God would forgive them and bless them:

Jeremiah 3:12-15: “Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say, Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the LORD; and I will not cause mine anger to fall upon you: for I am merciful, saith the LORD, and I will not keep anger for ever. Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed against the LORD thy God, and hast scattered thy ways to the strangers under every green tree, and ye have not obeyed my voice, saith the LORD. Turn, O backsliding children, saith the LORD; for I am married unto you: and I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion: And I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.”

God's message to Israel was *not* “Since you're evil, I'm going to kill all of you on the spot”. Instead God told them that

judgment was coming, but if they repented God then wouldn't destroy them. In fact, if they repented then God would gather them together and bless them! All they had to do was acknowledge their sin and repent. In other words, God was using Jeremiah to offer the people *mercy*.

The Lord told them that if they repented He would *not* remove them from the land, in spite of all the wicked things they had done:

Jeremiah 4:1: “If thou wilt return, O Israel, saith the LORD, return unto me: and if thou wilt put away thine abominations out of my sight, then shalt thou not remove.”

God did tell them that judgment was coming, but He also told them how to *stop* the judgment from coming. All they had to do was repent. If they stopped being evil – if they stopped worshipping idols and *burning their children alive* – then God would forgive them and bless them. They had a simple and straightforward way to avoid the terrible future that God warned them about.

But the people refused to repent. They wouldn't listen to God. They had no intention of putting an end to the *sacrifices of children* that they were carrying out. In fact, they were so wicked that God made Jeremiah a challenge: if he could find just *one* righteous person in the entire city of Jerusalem then God would pardon their sins and not bring judgment. However, the city was so evil that not a single righteous person could be found:

Jeremiah 5:1: “Run ye to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and see now, and know, and seek in the broad places thereof, if ye can find a man, if there be any that executeth judgment, that seeketh the truth; and I will pardon it.”

Abraham once asked God to spare Sodom if there were just ten righteous people in it. God offered to spare Jerusalem over *one* righteous man! Amazingly, the entire city was so corrupt that even one man couldn't be found. That's how bad things were.

God offered to pardon the city if they repented, but they didn't repent. So what did God do next? He made them the offer *again*:

Jeremiah 7:1-3: “The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all ye of Judah, that enter in at these gates to worship the LORD. Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place.”

You might recognize this as Jeremiah 7 – the very chapter we saw earlier where God said He was going to kill so many people that they would run out of room to bury them! What you might not have realized is the *context* of those verses. God told Jeremiah to proclaim that message *in the temple*, which is where you'd expect to find people dedicated to the worship of God. That means God was speaking to *temple worshippers*! It's true that God said He would kill many people, but notice what verse 3 says. The Lord made it clear that if the people repented then God would *not* kill them. If the people stopped their abominations then God would *not* judge them. Instead He would forgive their sins and spare their lives, and they would continue to dwell in the land.

We need to realize that God sent Judah a message of death and judgment in order to warn them that *they were going to die if they didn't repent*. However, if they repented then they would be saved. In that case they would *not* be killed, and the survivors would not be exiled from the land. Instead God would bless them. The reason God warned them about the coming judgment was *so*

they could avoid that judgment altogether. God wasn't saying "I'm going to kill all of you evil people, and there's nothing you can do about it". Instead God was *offering the people mercy!* He was telling them how to *avoid* His wrath. All the people had to do was repent and stop being evil. The people just had to stop lying, stop murdering, and *stop burning children alive* as sacrifices to idols. If they stopped then God would forgive them.

How did the temple worshipers respond to God's call for repentance? Well, Jeremiah tells us that instead of repenting they tried to kill him:

Jeremiah 11:19: "But I was like a lamb or an ox that is brought to the slaughter; and I knew not that they had devised devices against me, saying, Let us destroy the tree with the fruit thereof, and let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name may be no more remembered."

These people – who supposedly were worshipers of the Lord – *really* hated Jeremiah. They hated him so much that Jeremiah bitterly cursed the day he born:

Jeremiah 20:14-15: "Cursed be the day wherein I was born: let not the day wherein my mother bare me be blessed. Cursed be the man who brought tidings to my father, saying, A man child is born unto thee; making him very glad."

Even though Jeremiah was persecuted, God didn't stop offering His mercy to the people! God told Jeremiah that He didn't want to destroy Judah. Instead He wanted the nation to be a source of praise and glory that the whole world could see:

Jeremiah 13:11: "For as the girdle cleaveth to the loins of a man, so have I caused to cleave

unto me the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah, saith the LORD; that they might be unto me for a people, and for a name, and for a praise, and for a glory: but they would not hear.”

The book of Ezekiel tells us that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11). Instead God wants the wicked to repent of their sins and do what's right. That's why the Lord urged Judah to repent *over and over and over again*. He warned the nation that if they didn't repent then terrible judgments would come upon them.

Jeremiah took no joy in delivering these messages. He didn't delight in telling his neighbors that if they didn't repent they would be brutally killed. The coming judgment was so awful that even though it was falling upon incredibly wicked people, it moved Jeremiah to tears:

Jeremiah 13:15-17: “Hear ye, and give ear; be not proud: for the LORD hath spoken. Give glory to the LORD your God, before he cause darkness, and before your feet stumble upon the dark mountains, and, while ye look for light, he turn it into the shadow of death, and make it gross darkness. But if ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your pride; and mine eye shall weep sore, and run down with tears, because the LORD's flock is carried away captive.”

This isn't a message that's full of hate. Instead it's full of love and compassion! Jeremiah wasn't telling people “Just wait until you get what's coming to you! I'm really going to enjoy watching all of you get slaughtered.” Jeremiah was *genuinely heartbroken* over the coming judgment. He wasn't excited about it or longing for it. He urged the people to humble themselves and

repent so *they could avoid the judgment*. The fact that they refused to listen caused him to break down into tears. Jeremiah was trying to *save people*, not kill them. God used him to extend mercy to people who *definitely* didn't deserve it.

God just kept making the offer even though the people kept refusing it. Before Nebuchadnezzar's army surrounded Jerusalem and besieged it, Jeremiah preached the gospel of repentance for *40 years*. He preached through the reigns of three different kings: Josiah, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah. He preached year after year after year, all while people burned their children alive to idols and refused to listen to him.

The day finally came when the Babylonian army surrounded Jerusalem and besieged it. Do you know what God did next? *He offered the people mercy yet again:*

Jeremiah 38:17-18: “Then said Jeremiah unto Zedekiah, Thus saith the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel; If thou wilt assuredly go forth unto the king of Babylon's princes, then thy soul shall live, and this city shall not be burned with fire; and thou shalt live, and thine house: But if thou wilt not go forth to the king of Babylon's princes, then shall this city be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and thou shalt not escape out of their hand.”

At this point the people had spent *decades* persecuting Jeremiah. In fact, Jeremiah had spent the last few years in prison, and he was still in prison when he gave King Zedekiah this message! Judgment was literally just a few hours away, but even at this late hour *God was still offering them a way out*. If the people surrendered to the Babylonians then everything would be fine. If they did this *one thing* and obeyed God then He would spare the city, He would spare the life of Zedekiah, and He would also spare the life of Zedekiah's family. All they had to do was

obey God this one time and everything would be fine. At this point the city had nothing left to lose. They were entirely out of food and were facing imminent starvation and death.

So did the people repent and obey God? Sadly, no. Zedekiah refused to listen to the Lord, *even when he had nothing left to lose* and everything to gain! God offered him mercy at literally the last possible minute and Zedekiah turned it down. Since Zedekiah rejected God's mercy, he experienced God's wrath:

Jeremiah 52:6-11: “And in the fourth month, in the ninth day of the month, the famine was sore in the city, so that there was no bread for the people of the land. Then the city was broken up, and all the men of war fled, and went forth out of the city by night by the way of the gate between the two walls, which was by the king's garden; (now the Chaldeans were by the city round about:) and they went by the way of the plain. But the army of the Chaldeans pursued after the king, and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho; and all his army was scattered from him. Then they took the king, and carried him up unto the king of Babylon to Riblah in the land of Hamath; where he gave judgment upon him. And the king of Babylon slew the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes: he slew also all the princes of Judah in Riblah. Then he put out the eyes of Zedekiah; and the king of Babylon bound him in chains, and carried him to Babylon, and put him in prison till the day of his death.”

This is a horrific judgment – but remember, all of this was *completely avoidable*. God told Zedekiah exactly what to do to avoid all the things that happened to him. But Zedekiah wouldn't listen.

When this judgment fell upon the nation, most of the survivors (which weren't very many) were carried away to Babylon. However, the Babylonians left a few people behind to work the ground. God promised this surviving remnant that if they obeyed Him and remained in the land then He would watch over them, protect them, and bless them. All they had to do was remain in the land, and *not leave the country*:

Jeremiah 42:9-12: “And said unto them, Thus saith the LORD, the God of Israel, unto whom ye sent me to present your supplication before him; If ye will still abide in this land, then will I build you, and not pull you down, and I will plant you, and not pluck you up: for I repent me of the evil that I have done unto you. Be not afraid of the king of Babylon, of whom ye are afraid; be not afraid of him, saith the LORD: for I am with you to save you, and to deliver you from his hand. And I will shew mercies unto you, that he may have mercy upon you, and cause you to return to your own land.”

Notice how merciful God was being! The Lord told them that the time of His wrath was over. If they stayed in the land then God would bless them and protect them and give them the peace they were looking for. All they had to do to receive these great blessings was *stay right where they were* in the land of Judah. However, if they fled then terrible things would happen to them:

Jeremiah 42:13-17: “But if ye say, We will not dwell in this land, neither obey the voice of the LORD your God, Saying, No; but we will go into the land of Egypt, where we shall see no war, nor hear the sound of the trumpet, nor have hunger of bread; and there will we dwell: And now therefore hear the word of the LORD, ye

remnant of Judah; Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; If ye wholly set your faces to enter into Egypt, and go to sojourn there; Then it shall come to pass, that the sword, which ye feared, shall overtake you there in the land of Egypt, and the famine, whereof ye were afraid, shall follow close after you there in Egypt; and there ye shall die. So shall it be with all the men that set their faces to go into Egypt to sojourn there; they shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence: and none of them shall remain or escape from the evil that I will bring upon them.”

You see, God was testing their faith. At that time Egypt looked safe and Judah looked dangerous. God told the people that if they trusted Him – if they believed Him and demonstrated their faith by being obedient and remaining in the land – then He would bless them and protect them and give them a great future. However, if they refused to trust in Him and fled to Egypt (which *seemed* much safer) then they would die.

Do you know what the people did? They fled to Egypt. Do you know what the people did once they got to Egypt? They doubled-down on their idolatry – *the very thing that brought God's judgment upon them to begin with!* They refused to repent even after seeing all the terrible things that God had done to Jerusalem:

Jeremiah 44:16-17: “As for the word that thou hast spoken unto us in the name of the LORD, we will not hearken unto thee. But we will certainly do whatsoever thing goeth forth out of our own mouth, to burn incense unto the queen of heaven, and to pour out drink offerings unto her, as we have done, we, and our fathers, our kings, and our princes, in the cities of Judah, and

in the streets of Jerusalem: for then had we plenty of victuals, and were well, and saw no evil.”

Jeremiah had spent *forty years* telling the people that God's judgment was going to come upon them because of their wicked idolatry. These people then *experienced* that judgment. They saw all the prophecies come true. They saw the power of God – but instead of repenting they *continued to serve idols!* They insisted that their former prosperity came from idol worship, not the Lord. They were determined to worship the idols of Egypt no matter what.

Because of this, God told them that He was going to send Nebuchadnezzar to Egypt and have him conquer it. That king was going to burn the idols that they were trusting to save them:

Jeremiah 43:10-13: “And say unto them, Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will send and take Nebuchadrezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and will set his throne upon these stones that I have hid; and he shall spread his royal pavilion over them. And when he cometh, he shall smite the land of Egypt, and deliver such as are for death to death; and such as are for captivity to captivity; and such as are for the sword to the sword. And I will kindle a fire in the houses of the gods of Egypt; and he shall burn them, and carry them away captives: and he shall array himself with the land of Egypt, as a shepherd putteth on his garment; and he shall go forth from thence in peace. He shall break also the images of Bethshemesh, that is in the land of Egypt; and the houses of the gods of the Egyptians shall he burn with fire.”

God told them *in advance* that death and judgment were coming upon Egypt. The Lord told them that Nebuchadnezzar was going to conquer the land, kill many people, and burn their worthless idols. Do you know what God was doing? *He was offering them mercy!* If the people believed God then they would have repented of their sins and fled Egypt as if their lives depended upon it. Even at this late hour, and even after all the times they refused to repent, and even after they rejected God's mercy time and time again, *God was still offering them mercy.*

Do you see how astoundingly generous and merciful God was? The people who God was showing love and compassion to were *extremely* guilty. They weren't basically good people! They were desperately wicked and depraved. These weren't people who didn't know any better. They had been warned *repeatedly* for *forty years* and had witnessed God's wrath firsthand, and had *still* not repented in spite of it. Yet *even after all that*, God still offered them a chance to repent. He still extended His hand out to them.

This is how God Himself put it:

Jeremiah 7:25-26: “Since the day that your fathers came forth out of the land of Egypt unto this day I have even sent unto you all my servants the prophets, daily rising up early and sending them: Yet they hearkened not unto me, nor inclined their ear, but hardened their neck: they did worse than their fathers.”

Judah's rebellion wasn't something that began in the days of Jeremiah, nor was Jeremiah the first prophet that God sent to tell them judgment was coming and they needed to repent. God had actually been warning them for *hundreds of years!* This had been going on since the days of Moses. God could have struck them all dead the first time they stepped out of line; after all, that seems to be how people think the God of the Old Testament acted. But that's not what the Lord did! God, as it said, “rose up early” and sent prophet after prophet. When Judah encountered those

prophets the people rejected them, persecuted them, imprisoned them, and killed them. After *hundreds* of years of wickedness and burning children alive as human sacrifices, God sent His judgment upon them:

Jeremiah 44:22: “So that the LORD could no longer bear, because of the evil of your doings, and because of the abominations which ye have committed; therefore is your land a desolation, and an astonishment, and a curse, without an inhabitant, as at this day.”

God is very longsuffering but His patience has a limit. He will wait a very long time and offer mercy again and again, but there does come a day when His mercy stops and His judgment comes. Yet as we've seen, God is willing to save people at the very last minute *if only they'll repent*. When 2 Peter 3:9 says that God wasn't willing that any should perish but that all should come to the knowledge of repentance, the apostle was being serious! Look at how many times (and at such great personal cost to Jeremiah!) God offered mercy to wicked and depraved people.

Do you see how God's evangelistic efforts are so much more passionate than our own? Would *you* have put so much time and effort – and gone to such great personal expense – to repeatedly offer mercy to such wicked and hard-hearted people? *Yet God did exactly that!* The Lord kept going and kept persisting long after everyone else would have quit and gone home. He kept proclaiming His message to people who He knew hated it and wouldn't listen to it.

There's another side to this as well. It's true that God often preached a hellfire-and-brimstone message. Jesus Himself did this time and time again. In fact He had more to say about Hell and its horrors than about Heaven! But the book of Jeremiah should help put this into context. The reason God did this was so *people would repent and not have to experience all those terrible things!* God warned people about the coming judgment *to save them from*

it. He told them of the terrible danger they were in, and He then offered them mercy and forgiveness. God didn't lie about what was coming or hide it. The wrath of God is vast – but He offers *tremendous* mercy, even at the last possible minute and even to the most wicked of people. God wants everyone to know about the mortal danger they're in *so they might be saved*.

Think of it this way. It's one thing to go to the doctor and hear that you should take a certain medicine because it will make you happier and give you a better and more comfortable life. It's quite another thing to be told that if you don't take that medicine then you'll soon die a painful death! That puts the situation in a completely different perspective. The first message isn't terribly important, especially if you're more or less happy with your life. However, the second message is one that only a fool would ignore. If you're in tremendous danger then you need to know about it *immediately* lest you meet an awful fate. How heartbreaking it would be to meet that fate and then find out it was entirely avoidable!

In the New Testament Jesus offered forgiveness and grace to all who repent – and in the Old Testament God made *exactly the same offer*. In the New Testament we're told that God loved us and died for us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8), and in the Old Testament we see God reaching out in love and mercy to extremely wicked people. In both testaments we see God warning people about terrible judgments that were coming, and in both testaments we find God offering a way to *avoid* those judgments and receive peace and forgiveness instead. The message of the two testaments aren't different! They're actually the same, if only people will take the time to read them a little bit closer.