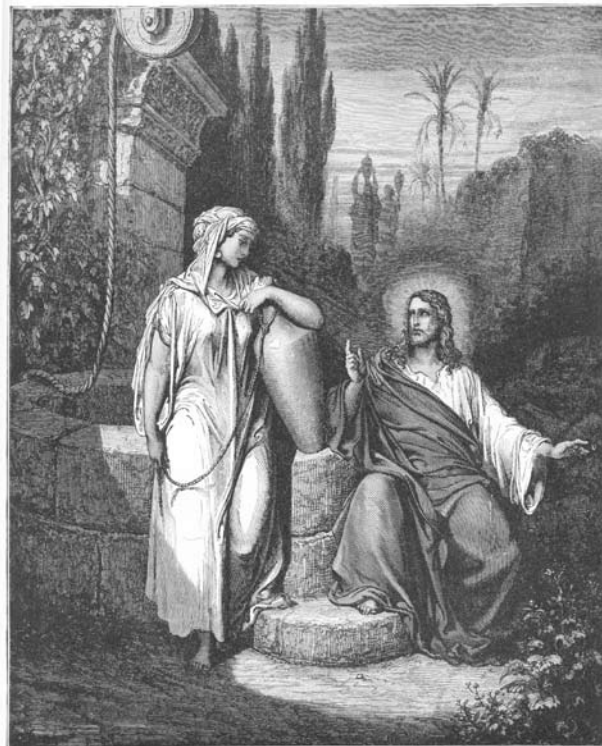


God's Justice, God's Love

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger for ever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities. For as the Heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him. ~ Psalm 103:8-13

MANY PEOPLE believe that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — the “God of the Old Testament” — is an angry God bent on punishment, but that Jesus is a loving God for whom punishment would be “out of character.” Is this true? Do we truly worship the one God who banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (see Gn 3:23-24), destroyed all the inhabitants of the earth but Noah and the seven members of his family (see Gn 7:17-23), rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah (see Gn 19:24-25), killed the firstborn of all Egypt to secure the Israelites’ freedom (see Ex 12:29-30), destroyed Pharaoh’s army when it threatened the safety of the fleeing Israelites (see Ex 14:28), and commanded that the Israelites destroy whole towns and tribes, down to the women, children, and animals (see, for example, Jos 6:20-21)? We are horrified when innocent lives are ended, yet God is the Lord and Giver of Life and his taking someone to himself is never an injustice. We cannot fully comprehend God’s purposes when, for example, he sanctions the destruction of whole



Jesus and the woman of Samaria, by Gustave Doré, 1835-1885

of Sodom and Gomorrah, the plagues on Egypt — God finds and saves those who are his own: “*The hand of our God is for good upon all that seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all that forsake him*” (Ezr 8:22).

The Old Testament is a history of Israel’s disobedience and God’s loving faithfulness. God makes repeated covenants with the Israelites which they break again and again, but which he faithfully keeps: “*For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my cove-*

cities or afflicts an entire people. “[*M*]y thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord” (Is 55:8). We must approach this mystery with faith in God’s justice.

And from the beginning of our creation, God’s tender love also shows forth. Adam and Eve’s banishment from Eden was a just punishment for their grievous sin of pride, disobedience, and lack of trust in God, yet he clothes them against the harsh world and, in his mercy, he promises them a savior (see Gn 3:1-20). In the greatest catastrophes — the Flood, the destruction

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nant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you" (Is 54:10). Never arbitrary, God's just punishments (often severe) are the only remedy that will bring the people to a state of repentance and conversion. The Israelites, his Chosen People, seemed to be the object of God's most severe chastisement, but these punishments were intended to prevent worse calamities: "For in the case of the other nations the Lord waits patiently to punish them until they have reached the full measure of their sins; but he does not deal in this way with us, in order that he may not take vengeance on us afterward when our sins have reached their height. Therefore he never withdraws his mercy from us. Though he disciplines us with calamities, he does not forsake his own people" (2 Mc 6:14-16). When God punishes Israel, it is with fatherly love: "for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights" (Prv 3:12).

Despite God's just wrath at the sins of his people, the story of the Old Testament remains a love story: "I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jer 31:3). God created his people out of love, and he yearns for their love in return: "And I will make my abode among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people. I am the Lord your God" (Lv 26:11-13). The prophet Joel gave Israel God's words and adds an admonishment: "Yet even now," says the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Jl 2:12-13). His love is greater than our sinfulness:

"spare [us] according to the greatness of thy steadfast love" (Neh 13:22).

In the Psalms, we hear of God's love for and mercy toward even the most hardened sinners: "[A] broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Ps 51:17); "If thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with thee" (Ps 130:3-4). He is ever-merciful, and his punishments are never as great as our sins: "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight, so that thou art justified in thy sentence and blameless in thy judgment.... Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Fill me with joy and gladness; let the bones which thou hast broken rejoice. Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities" (Ps 51:4, 7-9). Trust in God's love shows forth again and again: "How precious is thy steadfast love, O God!" (Ps 36:7); "be mindful of thy mercy, O Lord, and of thy steadfast love, for they have been from of old" (Ps 25:6);

"in God I trust without a fear" (Ps 56:11); "for the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures for ever, and his faithfulness to all generations" (Ps 100:5); "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever!" (Ps 106:1).

In the New Testament, Jesus fully reveals the depths of the Father's love, and gives his very life for our sake: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13; see also 1 Jn 3:16). Even more astounding is that we deserved punishment, not love, "but God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). In our stead, he "gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 5:2), and

***"The God of Israel and our Lord
Jesus Christ is the same God, always
tempering punishment with
love and mercy."***



The Judgment of Solomon, by Gustave Doré, 1855-1885

thereby “freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rv 1:5). We respond in awe and wonder at the boundless love of our Lord, a “love ... which surpasses knowledge, that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:19) and “be called children of God” (1 Jn 3:1).

Yet Jesus also tells us again and again of the horror of sin and the just consequence of sin, eternal punishment (see Mt 5:22; Mt 6:15; Mt 7:17-23; Mt 23:33; Mt 25:41-46; Mk 9:42-48; Lk 16:14-15; Lk 20:46-47; Jn 15:6). He drove the merchants and moneychangers from the Temple because of their sacrilege in his Father’s house (see Jn 2:13-17). He denounced those scribes and the Pharisees who were self-righteous and did not have any use for Jesus and the salvation he was bringing to the world (see Mt 23:13-36). He was especially harsh in condemning those who give scandal and thereby leading others to sin: “whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Mt 18:6).

And as in the Old Testament, payment for sin, especially hardness of heart, includes visible punishment by God in this world. Jesus formally cursed three cities in Galilee that had not responded to his teaching (see Mt 11:20-24), saying to Capernaum, “You shall be brought down to Hades” (Mt 11:23). These cities are uninhabited desolations today.

Jesus was especially grieved by the hard-heartedness of the Judaeans: “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Mt 23:37). He “wept over [Jerusalem], saying, ‘Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your

eyes. For the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another in you; because you did not know the time of your visitation” (Lk 19:41-44). The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, punishment for the failure of Jesus’ own people to accept him and his message, took place in 70 AD at the hands of the Romans.

Jesus is ever-forgiving and merciful. If the scribes and Pharisees, the residents of Galilee, or the residents of Jerusalem had turned to Jesus, he would have accepted and forgiven them. In fact, that is his desire for all people. His anger is an urgent call not to persist in our sins and an invitation to repent and return to our loving Father. The God of



DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

A small shrine to remember unborn victims of abortion

Israel and our Lord Jesus Christ is the same God, punishing when punishment is needed to force us to recognize our sinfulness and to bring us to our knees in repentance, but always tempering this punishment with love and mercy, so that we can, with the prophet, acknowledge that “thou hast dealt with us, O Lord our God, in all thy kindness and in all thy great compassion” (Bar 2:27).

The sins of the world today are enormous, not unlike those that brought down the wrath of God upon Sodom and Gomorrah (see Gn 18:20, 23-32) and the general depravity of the world at the time of Noah (see Gn 6:5, 11-12). We must marvel at the divine mercy and love that restrains a justly angered God. “[T]he love that never ends”¹ (CCC 25) is incomprehensible. Love, God’s love alone, holds back the just punishment we so rightly deserve.

(CCC 25, 202, 218-221, 271, 558, 584, 2285)

¹ Roman Catechism, Preface, 10; cf. 1 Corinthians 13:8