

The Death Of The Innocents

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When people are mistaken about the nature of God, they will be mistaken also about the character of God. On the other hand, when people have a true Biblical understanding of the nature of God, it should not be difficult for them to have a true Biblical understanding of the character of God.

All false charges against Almighty God collapse under the weight of the self-revelation of His true nature and character. God's love is perfect. He is good. He is righteous. He is just. He is wise beyond all the limits of the human mind. He is worthy of implicit and total trust.

The Song Of Moses proclaims God's perfection: "For I proclaim the name of the LORD: ascribe greatness to our God. He is the Rock; His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He" (Deuteronomy 32:3, 4).

It is always wrong to attack the character of God. Honest questions are good. Sincere searching is positive and productive. God invites us to come to Him with an honest heart and open mind. He always reveals Himself to people who do that. But any denial of the justice and morality of God's acts and providences comes from unbelief, an unwillingness to acknowledge God's self-revelation of His nature and character.

This kind of unbelief includes a proud unwillingness to acknowledge that God sees these events in their true light and that we do not. The mind of God is the final arbiter of truth and reality. God always knows and does what is right, just, and best when all factors are considered together. In most cases only God is able to know and consider all the factors together. Therefore, even when we cannot understand why God does certain things or allows them to happen, we can rest secure in His moral perfection. We trust what God does because we know who God is.

So then, we must remember that God always acts from His all-seeing, all-knowing, all-understanding, all-wise comprehensive view and eternal perspective. Accordingly, God acts and judges righteously and justly, modified by His grace and mercy whenever wisely and safely possible.

As the moral Governor of the universe, God has the ultimate responsibility to protect and uphold the universal moral order by administering moral law. The moral law is the law of reality and reason, and therefore the law of love and moral obligation. It is written in the mind of all moral agents. It is written also in the heart of believers.

It is written also in legislation, divine and human. It includes rewards and penalties. The

penalties are in place to demonstrate the value of what the law is there to protect, the guilt of harming what the law is there to protect, the consequences of doing so, and the determination of the moral and legal authority to protect society by enforcing the penalties of the law.

If the moral and legal authority did not have the right to enforce the law by executing its penalties, it would be no authority at all. Law would be only advice, and we know how much authority advice has by itself.

God has the right to uphold moral law and moral order, and to do so by punishing lawbreakers. When the destructiveness of moral rebellion reaches a tipping point where continued forbearance is no longer a virtue, God acts, has acted, and will act. Love—the commitment of the will to the highest good—demands it. When grace and mercy become ineffective, another quality of love—justice—must secure the highest good.

At times this has required the destruction of whole societies. The classic example of this is the Noachian Flood, when the entire civilization was destroyed (Genesis 6 - 8). Another occasion was the destruction of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18 and 19). We remember also the threat of the destruction of the entire population of the city of Nineveh, a disaster averted only by the repentance of the king and people (Jonah 3:1 - 10). It took the Babylonian captivity and the destruction of Jerusalem to cure Israel of its idolatry. Centuries later, Jesus wept over the city of His day, knowing that in a few decades it also would be destroyed with massive loss of life because the people did not know the time of their "visitation" by the Messiah (Luke 19:41 - 44).

We know that when a cancer threatens the entire body, radical surgery might be required to save its life. So also radical moral "surgery" is required in extreme cases to preserve the universal moral and social order. We should have little or no difficulty understanding how this applies to the radical measure of the Great Flood to save the hopelessly degenerate human race from extinction. That and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah served (or should serve) as sobering warnings to all future generations.

In all of His moral governance, including the infliction of discipline and punishment, God demonstrates clearly His utmost forbearance. God allowed the antediluvian civilization to persist and progress in evil until moral and social corruption had become systemic. "The earth was filled with violence" (Genesis 6:11 - 13).

Later, in response to the noble prayer of Abraham, God would have spared Sodom and Gomorrah if only ten righteous people were residing there. God said, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezekiel 33:11).

We observe this also in what God said to Abraham concerning his descendants. "Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also that nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (Genesis 15:13 - 16).

No matter how the four hundred year time period is calculated, the forbearance of God is clearly evident in what He said. The Amorites themselves lived east of the Jordan River and north of the Arnon, the area we identify as Syria. However, "Amorites" was a term applied also to the inhabitants of Canaan in general.

Abraham had first-hand knowledge of the iniquities of the Amorites. He might have marveled at the forbearance of God in stating that their sins had not yet reached full measure. God knew more than Abraham or anyone else how corrupt the Amorites were, and still He was giving them four hundred years! Only God knew how to harmonize such patience with His justice!

Nevertheless, the time came for justice to be done. The Amorites used their "borrowed time" not as an opportunity for repentance but to complete their depravity, waste their priceless chance for repentance, and bring on their destruction. The consequences were horrific.

Down in Egypt God was preparing His people for their destiny. The ancient Israelites were not a primitive horde of nomadic Semites who invaded Palestine and ruthlessly slaughtered the Canaanites just to take their land, who then made up an imaginary god they called *yahweh* to justify it. They were the covenant people of the true and living God, called to be holy, chosen to be the repository of His special revelation and His witness to the nations.

The Promised Land was God's chosen place to accomplish this. He had searched it out for them (Ezekiel 20:6). It was called "the land of the LORD" (Isaiah 14:2). God said, "The land is Mine" (Leviticus 25:23). Several times He referred to it as "My land" (e.g., Isaiah 14:25; Jeremiah 2:7; Ezekiel 36:5; 38:16; Joel 3:2). God gave it to Israel, but not unconditionally. He reserved the right to expel them if they did not obey Him. That should be a sobering thought for any who would assumptively claim title to the land.

Before God could establish Israel in His land, the land had to be morally purged—thoroughly. The contemporary inhabitants had forfeited their right to live on God's earth, particularly in His chosen land. God had said to Moses, "For the land is defiled; therefore I visit the punishment of its iniquity upon it, and the land vomits out its inhabitants" (Leviticus 18:25). God urged Israel to obey Him, "lest the land vomit you out also when you defile it, as it vomited out the nations that were before you [speaking proleptically]" (verse 28; see also Leviticus 20:22). Perhaps that was reflected in the report of the ten spies: "The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants" (Numbers 13:32). Though their report was exaggerated, it very likely had a factual basis. Perhaps some plagues were already taking a toll on the population.

God had prepared Israel to be His special agent to bring divine judgment. It was a surgical operation by military action. It was justice before conquest. For that reason God did not allow the Israelites to take anything for themselves when Jericho fell. It was under the ban, "accursed." Joshua warned the people, "And you, by all means keep yourselves from the accursed things, lest you become accursed when you take of the accursed things, and make the camp of Israel a curse, and trouble it. But all the silver and gold, and vessels of bronze and iron, are consecrated to the LORD; they shall come into the treasury of the LORD" (Joshua 6:18, 19).

When Achan took the accursed thing, the punishment cost him his life and the life of his sons and daughters (Joshua 7:15, 24 - 26). When Achan brought those things into his tent, Achan's wife (if he had one) and his sons and daughters should have screamed, "Take those things out of here!" Achan did not perish alone in his iniquity (Joshua 22:20). This is a solemn lesson to parents.

Later, the soldiers were allowed to take the booty of certain cities (Joshua 8:2; 11:14). This was only after their higher purpose had been established.

Because the people of the land were unrepentant incorrigibles and their historic and progressive corruption had become irreversibly systemic, the only reasonable option was the complete eradication of the culture. This required total annihilation.

Before Israel could settle down in the land and become an established monotheistic nation for the glory of God and as a testimony to His moral law, all idolatry with its degenerate practices had to be completely and permanently uprooted. Even though the loss of life is deeply regrettable, any remnant that would have been permitted to survive would have corrupted the nation, spiritually and morally weak and vulnerable as it was at the time of the conquest. That would have resulted in an even greater disaster. In fact, the failure of the Israelites to follow through did bring on their downfall during the times of the judges.

We must remember that God Himself commanded the eradication of the corrupt culture. He said through Moses, "When the LORD your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them" (Deuteronomy 7:2). "But of the cities of these peoples which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance, you shall let nothing that breathes remain alive, but you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, just as the LORD your God commanded you, lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done for their gods, and you sin against the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 20:16 - 18).

When Israel conquered Jericho under the leadership of Joshua, "they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, ox and sheep and donkey, with the edge of the sword" (Joshua 6:21). Only Rahab the prostitute and all those with her were spared because of her faith (Hebrews 11:31). The other inhabitants refused to repent even though they were afraid, knowing the history of the Israelites and that Israel was the instrument of God's just judgment. They had six days to consider their ways as the Israelites marched around their city. They should have been throwing their idols over the walls.

So the conquest continued. Ai was next. "Joshua did not draw back his hand, with which he stretched out the spear, until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai" (Joshua 8:26).

Next, the Gibeonites tricked Joshua into making an unwise treaty with them that spared the population of that city. Joshua honored the treaty. The Gibeonites knew that they were under the judgment of God. They said to Joshua that they tricked him "because it was certainly told your servants [the Gibeonites] that the LORD your God commanded His servant Moses to give you all the land, and to destroy all the inhabitants of the land from before you; therefore we were very much afraid for our lives because of you, and have done this thing" (Joshua 9:24). The Gibeonites became "woodcutters and water carriers for the congregation and for the altar of the LORD" (verse 27).

Adoni-Zedek was king of Jerusalem. What did he do? Instead of repenting, he called four other kings to form a coalition to punish Gibeon for making peace with Joshua. Because of the treaty Joshua made with Gibeon, the Israelites came to the aid of Gibeon and defeated the five Amorite kings. They "killed them with a great slaughter" (Joshua 10:5). God Himself "cast down large hailstones from heaven on them as far as Azekah, and they died. There were more who died from the hailstones than those whom the children of Israel killed with the sword" (verse 11). In His holiness and justice God Himself helped carry out His death-sentence on the impenitent. The five kings were executed publicly (verses 22 - 27). Next the Israelites conquered Makkedah, destroying "all the people who were in it" (verse 28). From there they proceeded to

conquer southern Canaan. They "utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the LORD God of Israel had commanded" (verses 29 - 43).

The conquest of northern Canaan was next. Jabin, king of Hazor, formed a large coalition of kings to fight against Israel. It should have been a "coalition of mass repentance." Instead, it was a coalition formed in defiance of the justice of God on their idolatries and adulteries. The result was predictable: utter destruction and total annihilation (Joshua 11:1 – 15).

Joshua 11:16 - 23 is a summary of Joshua's conquests. Only Gibeon made peace with Israel. The other cities were conquered by military action. "For it was of the LORD to harden their hearts, that they should come against Israel in battle, that He might utterly destroy them, and that they might receive no mercy, but that He might destroy them, as the LORD commanded Moses" (Verse 20). Generations of divine mercy had been categorically rejected. So God "hardened" their hearts; that is, God withdrew all divine restraint and let them continue in the hardness of their heart, even egging them on in their chosen resolve to fight Joshua and Israel and even God Himself.

Joshua 12:1 - 6 lists the names of the kings east of the Jordan River who were conquered by Moses; verses 13 - 34 list the kings west of Jordan who were conquered by Joshua.

Joshua 13:1 - 7 describes the land yet to be conquered and possessed. "Now Joshua was old, advanced in years. And the LORD said to him, 'You are old, advanced in years, and there remains very much land yet to be possessed'" (Joshua 13:1). The idolaters who were allowed to remain in the land were the "cancer cells" that spread and wrought so much spiritual, moral, cultural, social and even physical havoc among the covenant people of God. They raised up new generations of idolaters who also destroyed their own souls.

After God defeated the soldiers of Pharaoh at the Red Sea, Moses wrote, "The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is His name" (Exodus 15:3). The psalmist David said, "Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle" (Psalm 24:8). America and its allies were certainly praying for God's intervention against Adolf Hitler during World War II.

Much later, during the days of the prophet Samuel, Samuel said to king Saul, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'I will punish what Amalek did to Israel, how he laid wait for him on the way when he came up from Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey'" (1 Samuel 15:3).

This part of the Bible is not what we think of as pleasant, spiritually uplifting reading. It is difficult and deeply disturbing. It raises some of the most profound issues and questions. Nevertheless, it is inspired history that needs to be faced and its lessons need to be engraved on our minds and souls.

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). Without this and other similar passages in the Bible, believers and unbelievers alike will not have a full and necessary understanding of the true nature of God. Let it no longer be said that "God is a God of justice as well as a God of love." That erroneously places God's justice over against and in antithesis to His love. God is love, and love is both just and merciful. It is correct to say that God is a God of justice as well as a God of mercy, because both justice and mercy are acts of God's love—that is, they are both

means of securing the highest good and well-being, all things being considered together, and that is the motive of love. "Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13). Judgment is the necessary alternative only when continued mercy is no longer reasonable and therefore no longer a virtue.

We will never know and appreciate the true grace of God unless we understand it within the context of His holiness and His right and obligation to punish sin. Likewise, we will never understand God's profound love and grace in Christ's death on the cross without that context. There is no "cheap grace" when we stand beneath the cross of Christ and view what it cost God to save us without violating His holiness and justice. There can be no true revival without an awakening to the holiness and majesty of God and the corresponding evil and guilt of sin.

We must never judge what God does, for we do not see what God sees. We must never start with what God does and from that form a concept of who God is. If we do, we will form a caricature of God. A mental image of God is just as false as a metal image. We must always begin with who God is—His person and character, as He has revealed Himself to be. God is love. He knows what He is doing and why. That is our foundation and starting point whenever we encounter things that God does that we do not understand now.

God has a higher and more comprehensive view of life than we do. His perspective is perfect and complete. Life in our present temporal body is fleeting. "All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the LORD endures forever" (1 Peter 1:24, 25; from Isaiah 40:6 - 8). "For what is your life [zoe, physical life]? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away" (James 4:14).

As precious as it is, our present physical life is temporal. It diminishes as we grow older. It vanishes away. Unless Christ returns first, none of us is going to get out of this world alive. The resurrection will change all that. For now, physical life is expendable.

God places a far greater value on the soul and spirit than on the body. Jesus said to His disciples (and thus to all believers), "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul" (Matthew 10:28; also Luke 12:4). Since He spoke those words countless believers have given their lives. Many died in the past and others are dying today as martyrs for Christ, refusing to deny Him in order to save their own "skin." Like the worthies of old, they "were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection" (Hebrews 11:35). "They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death" (Revelation 12:11 NIV). Others have gone and are still going to preach the gospel in dangerous places, willing to give their lives if necessary to bring the words of eternal life to others.

Jesus said that it would be far better to enter into eternal life without an eye, hand, or foot in this life, if necessary, than to live this present life in a whole body and end up in hell (Matthew 18:8, 9; Mark 9:43 - 48). Jesus was not advocating self-mutilation. He was saying that the eternal consequences of sin are so horrific that such an extreme measure would be preferable to spending eternity in Gehenna. His words were designed to shock people into realizing that sane people would stop using the members of their body as tools to sin long before they would mutilate themselves.

Along with the Corinthian church, Paul had to judge a man in the congregation who was doing what even the ungodly did not do. He delivered the man "to Satan for the destruction of the flesh [body], that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Corinthians 5:5). In

other words, he removed divine protection from the man so that whatever Satan might do to his body would bring him to repentance and restoration.

Many years ago I was present in a church service when a man whose hand had been severed in an accident stood up, held up what remained of his arm, and said emphatically, "I thank God for this. It brought me to God!"

Believers live our lives from God's viewpoint. From that perspective, we see our present physical life, our *zoe*, as a passing vapor that we know we cannot grasp and hold onto. Also, we do not waste it in frivolous pursuits and risky thrill-seeking acts. We use it wisely as a God-given resource with priceless time-limited opportunity to live real life to the full. We live with eternity's values in view.

We regard human life as God regards it, precious yet expendable in the light of eternal values and consequences. We agree with Jesus when He said regarding Judas Iscariot, "It would have been good for that man if he had never been born" (Mark 14:21). We also understand the statement, "The righteous perishes, and no man takes it to heart; merciful men are taken away, while no one considers that the righteous is taken away from evil" (Isaiah 57:1).

God is the source and sustainer of life. He gives it and He can take it away. God said, "I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; nor is there any who can deliver from My hand" (Deuteronomy 32:39).

As the saying goes, "An automobile is not the only thing that can be recalled by its maker."

God said, "Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine; the soul who sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4; also verse 20). We should be able to understand and affirm that in view of God's universal moral authority and responsibility. The question that needs to be specifically addressed is the death of infants and other innocent children.

God's necessary judgments on whole civilizations and societies, such as the Noachian flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, included the unavoidable loss of innocent life, especially infants and young children. In those cases, and also when Israel carried out divine justice on the inhabitants of Canaan, God was not punishing the innocents. It is impossible to punish an innocent person. An innocent person can suffer, and many have suffered and others still do, but it is morally and legally impossible to punish an innocent person.

God was concerned about the infants and innocent children of Nineveh when He sent the prophet Jonah to cry out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4). When Nineveh repented, that met the lowest possible condition to make it just for God to spare the city. When Jonah complained, God said to him, "Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left, and also much livestock?" (Jonah 4:11).

God Himself grieves over the sufferings and death of the innocent. We know this from God's self-revelation of His nature and character. We see that self-revelation incarnate in Jesus Christ. Jesus fully demonstrated the Father's love for infants and children. He said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16). He took them up in His arms and blessed them. He warned, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a

millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:6; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2). In other words, it would be better for him if the Mafia got him. As Jesus was being led out to be crucified, He said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children" (Luke 23:2).

This tells us how the Father must have grieved over the loss of innocent lives that accompanied His necessary judgment on those who had been destroying the souls of their own children for centuries.

No one is qualified to judge the just and righteous judgments of the Holy One because no one sees them as He does. If we could see these events from the perspective of eternal values and consequences, as God sees them, we would immediately recognize His justice and wisdom.

Let us consider the realities on the ground. If the Israelites had adopted the infants and young children, they would not have assimilated into the spiritual and cultural life of the nation. They would have grown up realizing that they were different. They would have learned what happened to their parents. They would have been resentful and bitter over it. They would have wanted to know what kind of people their parents were, how they lived, and what gods they served. They would have associated together and formed an idolatrous subculture that would have corrupted Israel. They would have lost their own souls forever. Israel became too weak spiritually to prevent it or to resist the temptation to do likewise.

Subsequent events proved this. The infants and small children who were allowed to survive became parents and grandparents of generations of idolaters who became the enemies of God and the corrupters of Israel. For proof one need only read the Book Of Judges.

The Israelites were not the ones being cruel to the innocents. Their own parents were the ones being cruel to their children by leading them into idolatry. That was by far the worst form of child abuse. That was the atrocity.

Those infants and young children were taken to Heaven immediately, and they are forever grateful that God did not allow them to live to suffer the horrific fate of the ones who survived.

People who judge what the Israelites did at God's command must ask themselves, "What am I doing to my children's souls?" If you are not right with God, and if they follow you, where will they spend eternity? Jesus says, "Let them come to Me." Not only let them; bring them.

It must be recognized that these judgments were singular events at specific times in extreme situations and under extreme conditions. They were necessary drastic measures ordered directly by God and carried out for transcendent purposes. They do not establish a precedent for future practices. They are not a rationale for killing infants and innocent children "to make sure they go to heaven." God alone has authority over life and death. Regarding human life and death, human beings and human authorities may do only what God specifically authorized.

These events and also the judgments that fell on the Israelites themselves "became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted" (1 Corinthians 10:6). They are written "for our admonition, on whom the end of the ages have come" (verse 11).

God did not eradicate the Canaanite society by a physical event, such as the Flood or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. He commanded the Israelites to do so with the sword.

That was so very direct and personal. It was physically and emotionally traumatic, for both the Canaanites and also the Israelite soldiers. Remember, the Israelites were not ruthless savages. They were the people of God chosen to demonstrate to the world His moral character. They had received directly from God the holy Law, that embodied the highest morality.

The Israelites had to witness divine judgment "up close and personal." They had to experience it first hand, and there was no better way than to be personally involved. They had to see and feel the trauma of "the wages of sin." The horror of God's judgment on idolatry had to be seared permanently into their national consciousness.

On an earlier occasion, the Midianites sent their women out to seduce the men of Israel. The strategy was very effective. The spiritual and moral failure was so great that God had to send a plague. Twenty-four thousand died in the plague, twenty-three thousand in one day (Numbers 25:1 - 9; 1 Corinthians 10:18).

God commanded Moses to take vengeance on the sexually promiscuous Midianites, killing the males and all females who were "sexually active." After the mission was accomplished, Moses ordered every Israelite who had killed someone, or even touched a dead body, to remain outside the camp for seven days. They were to "purify" themselves and their captives for seven days, offering a sacrifice on the third and seventh days (Numbers 31:19 - 24).

This was more than merely ritualistic. These men had witnessed and participated in an extremely horrific military action (as did their captives). They needed this seven days to start to process their "post traumatic stress," psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually. It was seven days of rest, reflection, soul-searching and worship. God had already instituted this as a general process for all who came in contact with a dead body (Numbers 19). It is not unreasonable to assume that the Israelites continued the practice during their subsequent conquest of Canaan. The need for it certainly continued.

The Father and the Son and The Holy Spirit are one. They are of one character, mind, and will. The command of God to annihilate the hopelessly corrupt society of ancient Canaan was the united will of all Persons in the Trinity, including the Second Person.

Jesus always honored the Father. He addressed the Father: "Righteous Father" (John 17:25). He never judged nor even questioned the actions of God. He did not introduce a new and different "God." It is vain to plead that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is a different "God" from the "god" of Moses and Joshua, and/or to postulate that the "god" of ancient Israel was a non-existent construct of the primitive Hebrew mind.

The reproaches that people heap on God fell on Jesus Christ (Psalm 69:9; Romans 15:3).

Jesus affirmed both the justice and the mercy of God. Although both are found in the Old Testament, Jesus came to give us the full revelation of the mercy of God. Jesus gave us a full view of some qualities of God's character that had not been featured under the Old Covenant. Those qualities are lovely and awe-inspiring. But Jesus did not change God. God is immutable, unchanging, and He is not a fool.

Jesus revealed and provided God's better way. He emphasized that "mercy triumphs over judgment," as James writes (James 2:13). When Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said ..., But I say to you ...," He was emphasizing two things: (1) we must not use the legal injunctions and sanctions of the Mosaic Law to justify "getting even" in inter-personal relations;

and (2) that under the New Covenant God has provided grace through Christ to help us live in love, forbearance, and forgiveness. That has been the will and purpose of God all along.

This is the day of grace. It is the day of salvation; the time for repentance; the time when God is holding His judgment in abeyance while the gospel is being proclaimed throughout the world; the time when the Holy Spirit is convicting the world of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8); the time when the Father is drawing people to Christ by His spirit; the time when believers are making their "calling and election sure" (2 Peter 1:10) and are becoming "conformed to the image of His Son" (Romans 8:29).

During this time, "the weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world" (2 Corinthians 10:4 NIV). We are in a spiritual battle, fighting for people, not against them (Ephesians 6:12).

Nevertheless, this time will come to an end. The day of judgment will certainly arrive. Then people will see Jesus in a different way. People usually think of Jesus in His incarnation and humiliation here on earth: the Babe in the manger; the gentle Jesus loving the children and healing the sick; the suffering Jesus on the cross. All of this is true, yet not all of the truth. Also, many people create their own imaginary "Jesus."

Even when Jesus was here on earth, He warned that if we do not receive Him as our Savior we will certainly face Him as our Judge. That was part of the conclusion of His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:21 - 23).

In the Holy Scriptures the apostle Paul wrote that Jesus shall be "revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 1:7, 8). He gave us a very vivid description of what it will be like. Unbelievers will cry out to the rocks and mountains, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb" (Revelation 6:15 - 17). "The wrath of the Lamb." That certainly is not what people usually have in mind when they think of Jesus.

The same is true of what Jesus Himself revealed from Heaven to the apostle John. John saw heaven opened, and Jesus coming in power. "In righteousness He judges and makes war." "He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God." We read the detailed account in Revelation 19:11- 16.

At the judgment, believers will judge the world (1 Corinthians 6:2). Participating in that judgment could be far more grievous for believers than the killing of Canaanites was for the men of Israel. We are thankful that "God will wipe away every tear" from our eyes (Revelation 7:17; 21:4). At that time no innocent infants and children will be lost. They are all safe in Christ forever.