

## Isn't the God of the Old Testament Different than the God of New Testament?

It's not surprising that many people believe the God portrayed in the Old Testament is different than the God of the New Testament. In the Old Testament, we see God calling down fire and brimstone to destroy a city, commanding the complete massacre of certain enemy territories, and sending venomous snakes when the people of Israel grumble about their room and board. Compare this with Jesus' teaching about turning the other cheek, his intentional efforts to seek and save the lost, and even his own merciful death on our behalf, and one could certainly get the impression that the God of the Old and New Testaments is either wholly different or at least had a significant makeover. But while this interpretation is reasonable if one considers only selected portions of each Testament, it becomes less tenable if one weighs the expanse of teaching and narrative found in both.

In the Old Testament, God is often viewed as full of wrath and fury. But is this really the whole story? In the book of Genesis, for example, we see God quickly providing clothing for Adam and Eve when sin brought about the sense of nakedness. When Cain kills his brother Abel, God sees that his life is preserved when he most certainly could have taken it. Oh, yes, God did start over, so to speak, with the flood, but those other than Noah and his family could have boarded the ark and been saved from death had they too listened to the Lord. Later in the story of the Old Testament, we see God giving nations and people great opportunities to repent, and when they did he quickly brought restoration. This was true not just for Israel, but for vicious rulers like Nebuchadnezzar and ruthless peoples like the Ninevites. Consider also the length of time he gave the Canaanites to repent before the Israelites entered the land and destroyed them. The text says some 500 years. That's a lot of patience on God's part. And then even when the Israelites did attack on God's command, God didn't forget to save a dubious, but God-fearing woman like Rahab. Add to all this God's clear intention throughout the Old Testament to include people from every nation and people in his kingdom and one has a hard time painting the God of the Old Testament as an ogre waiting to swat down each and every sinner or enemy of Israel.

So if God displays considerable grace in the Old Testament and not only holy justice, what can be said of God in the New Testament if we look at the text more carefully? First, let's consider the words of Jesus. While it is true Jesus encouraged turning the other cheek, Jesus was not shy in calling religious leaders of his day hypocrites and children of hell. He also made it very clear that anyone, religious prig or not, who rejected him was condemned before God and would be left to weeping and gnashing of teeth when he returned to establish his everlasting kingdom. He even said that some of the towns he visited would be worse off in the end than Old Testament cities that had been burned to the ground. Oh certainly, Jesus was full of grace, and mercy, compassion, but he exemplified God's holy justice as well.

Then let us consider the teaching of Paul who penned a great deal of the New Testament. Paul told his readers that the wages of sin is death, and while the gift of God is eternal life, it is only available to those who trust in Christ regardless of how upright one lives. No doubt Paul loved people well; his letters attest to this. But when some began to preach the necessity of certain good works to get into the kingdom of God, Paul said he hoped the errant teachers would go to hell and even that their genitals be cut off. I am not making this up! It's in the New Testament (Galatians 1:9; 5:12).

Finally, when examining the New Testament, one must also consider the book of Revelation and its promises about the end of the world as we know it. It isn't pretty. Large proportions of Earth's population die from plague and famine. Waters turn bitter and kill people, earthquakes swallow others, and locust-like creatures torment inhabitants for months on end. And then there is the final declaration

that those who have not trusted in Christ will be thrown into the Lake of Fire. This is not to say that the book of Revelation does not offer grace. It most certainly does. It offers glorious life with God without cost (21:6), but it makes it clear that if the gift of life in Christ is not received, the hammer of God's justice will fall.

In view of the larger picture of both Testaments, it is hard to conclude that the God portrayed in each is somehow different. It is convenient to paint God as different in each, because then we can pick which of the two Gods we like. But the Bible doesn't really leave this option open. It presents God as holy and just, willing to mete out punishment for our rejection of him and his ways. It also presents God as merciful and full of grace, desiring to call us his own when we repent and receive the pardon afforded by the death of his Son. The choice, then, is not between the God of the Old Testament or the New, but between accepting or rejecting the same God who is portrayed in both.

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