

She Bears and Stones: What Does it Say About God?

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | February 4, 2011



What are your views on God sending a she-bear to maul children after they made “fun” of one of God’s prophets for being bald. That has really, really bothered me and seems very harsh

and has really hurt my trust in God’s character. I mean, what child hasn’t teased someone one time or another??? That does not mean they deserve death. I have an 8 yr old daughter, so the thought of God having her killed over something so trivial makes me angry and I feel it’s highly unjust.

The 2nd: In the OT, God orders a man to be stoned to death for gathering firewood on the Sabbath. That one has really, really damaged my faith severely. What if the man was just gathering wood to build a fire to keep he and his family warm or to cook food? Does that mean I may be destroyed on the day of Judgement because I make my bed, cook meals for my family and load the dishwasher on the Sabbath??? I really don’t see how these tasks are any different than gathering wood. It’s not as though he was out gathering wood just for “kicks”. Wood serves 2 purposes—keeping warm, or cooking food. I understand there are consequences in sinning, and most definitely believe there should be! BUT....shouldn’t the punishment fit the crime? He

could've punished them with having their homes destroyed or a loss of all their belongings, etc...(just examples).

I'm hoping you can shed a different light on the two incidents. I would LOVE to truly LOVE God again and feel as though He is worthy of worship. Thank you in advance for your reply! I really appreciate your time and value your opinion.

When reading the Old Testament (OT) we must always read it through the landscape of the Great Controversy over the character of God with Jesus as our focal lens. He was God in human form and was the God who acted in the OT. So, several questions must be answered - Who do you understand Jesus to be? Is He fully God? Did the fullness of the Godhead dwell in Him? Is it true the Father was in the Son? Is it true that when we see Jesus we see the Father? Is it true that Jesus exactly revealed the character and nature of God?

If the answers to all of these questions are yes, and we read an OT story and think it presents God in some other light than Jesus revealed, then we know we are in some way misunderstanding the story.

We also must ask, through what framework do we see these stories? How do we understand God's creation and His law? In other words, how do we understand the basic principles God designed the universe to run upon?

Do we understand God as a dictator who creates beings and then enacts laws to govern His creatures and as the governing authority, in order to maintain justice, is then required to "police" His universe, detain violators, hold judicial proceedings, and eventually mete out arbitrarily imposed penalties?

Or do we see God as the "Creator," the One who actually built the universe, the One who constructed everything, and therefore, built the design template upon which all things operate? Since God says He IS love, wouldn't He create His universe to operate in harmony with His own nature and character, especially since all life originates in God and all life is sustained by God? If this is so, then is God's law enacted rules or the principles upon which the universe is constructed to operate - laws of gravity, thermodynamics, and ultimately the law of love, giving, and beneficence?

When we understand the universe as God constructed it and His law as an expression of His own nature of love, then we understand several important elements. First life is only possible when it is in harmony with the design protocols upon which it was constructed by God to exist. In this case, perfect harmony with God's character of love. Second, sin is "lawlessness" or stepping outside of the very protocols life was built to operate upon. Therefore, "the wages of sin is death" or "sin when full grown brings forth death." Why? For the same reason death ensues when someone violates the "law" of respiration and ties a plastic bag over their head. Life only exists in harmony with the principles upon which it was constructed to operate. We were designed to breathe, if we break this law we die. The same is true in the Spiritual realm. God created us to operate in perfect harmony with His character of love. Deviations, without remedy, unavoidably result in death.

With all of this in mind we can proceed to understand your questions.

What is the condition of all mankind since Adam sinned? Our natural state is terminal - we are all dying of a terminal condition and, unless remedied, all will cease to exist. God, however, has a plan to remedy

our condition and that plan required Jesus to come. Satan did not want Jesus to come and thus began working to close the avenue through which He could be incarnate. In other words, Satan worked to get every human to permanently close their hearts to God so no one would cooperate with God and the Messiah could not be born. At one point in human history there were only 8 people still willing to work with God - Satan came close. God acted in OT times to keep open the channel for the Messiah lest all humanity be lost.

When we understand the reality of God's universe we see that sin damages and destroys, resulting in death, and God as the great architect and source of life has been working, like a doctor, to heal and restore His creation. All God's actions in Scripture are evidence of His intervention to prevent sin from destroying His creation. It is not God acting as an arbitrary judge to inflict penalties for disobedience. This idea comes from seeing God and heaven through the lens of earthly governments. But no earthly government represents the government of God, that is why in scripture earthly governments are always represented by ferocious beasts, where as Jesus is the lamb - stark contrast.

Consider a doctor trying to save a patient who has a gangrene foot - the doctor may cut off the foot to save the man, and the uneducated may go forth and describe the doctor as a mutilator or butcher, but we know the doctor is working to save. When we persist in sin long enough we can destroy within our minds the very faculties which respond to love and truth. If and when that happens there is nothing more God can do for us because no amount of love or truth will have any impact upon us. Such individuals would be like gangrene cells on the body, only infecting and bringing death to other healthy cells. And just like a good doctor will sometimes surgically remove dead tissue, God sometimes has removed people who were beyond any help and only injuring and hurting others and obstructing His healing plan.

We must also remember that, even when God took such action He only put people to sleep in the graves, those very same individuals will be resurrected in one of two resurrections. Thus, God's actions did not terminate their existence, but only interrupted their existence, and that only for the purpose of healing His creation.

The case of the she-bears is a situation in which God's people had become so hardened in mind and heart that they would not listen to His prophet and thus an entire nation was in danger of being eternally lost. These youth were making fun of Elisha saying "go up baldy." This "go up" was a reference to Elijah's chariot ride into heaven. They were basically saying Elisha was a fool and made the entire thing up and no one should listen to him. After the she-bear incident Elisha was listened to and taken seriously.

Imagine your entire church was dying of anthrax poisoning and the doctor, who had the antibiotics to save everyone, was being represented as a con man, a snake oil salesman, so no one would take the remedy and the entire church might now die. Suddenly, those who were making such allegations were miraculously dealt with. What would happen? Might the rest of the church be willing to take the remedy and be saved? But if there were no miraculous intervention, everyone would continue to believe the lies and they would die from anthrax.

We must also remember God was not punishing sin. According to Scripture what is the punishment for sin? There is only one punishment for sin and that is eternal non existence - why? Because unremedied sin severs one from God, who is the source of life, and keeps one outside the design God created life to operate upon. God does not have to "inflict" this punishment, it is unavoidable if one is not restored into

unity with God.

In order to understand why someone was stoned for picking up sticks on Sabbath one has to understand the mindset of the people at the time and the best way to demonstrate that is to tell a true story that happened in 2006 and reported on National Public Radio by John Hendren.

John Hendren wanted to find out why so many Iraqi civilians were dying in the war zone, was it war related or due to other factors. What he discovered was astonishing. He reported on a grocer and his three employees who were shot and killed and the store firebombed because they did not display their vegetables in the way the local cleric had ordered. The local cleric had ordered that celery stalks should not be displayed next to tomatoes as one might get a loosely connected sexual connotation. Anyway, the grocer did display his vegetables this way and so the four people were killed and the store firebombed.

Now, if you were the magistrate of Bagdad, in your judgment, which is a more serious crime, standing up celery next to tomatoes or driving drunk? And in your judgment would you give the death penalty for drunk driving? Of course not! But what if you were governing a people who believed that standing up celery stalks next to tomatoes was a crime punishable by death, what penalty would you have to give drunk driving in order for them to realize it is at least that serious? If you gave drunk driving a \$500 fine but they believed the celery/tomato combo is a death penalty, how seriously would they take drunk driving?

You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. Matthew 5:38-45.

The reason God meets people where they are and speaks on their level and gives rules they can comprehend, even when it isn't His ideal, is because what God wants cannot be forced. God wants genuine love in our hearts and this can only be achieved via truth presented in love and leaving people free to choose. As Paul says, "each person must be fully persuaded in their own minds." (Rom 14:5).

When one has been in a dark cave for days they cannot come out into the bright sunlight, that much light is not only painful but blinding. Likewise, when people have been habituated in spiritual darkness, God cannot take them directly to the brightness of His ideal, it is painful and blinding. So He meets them in their darkness and slowly leads them to the light!

So what do we see in the OT? I see a patient, gracious, loving God, dealing with sick humans whose hearts and minds were darkened by sin, meeting them where they were, and doing all in His power to heal and to save. How do you see it?