

1. The Shepherd's Crucible

Biblical material: Psalm 23, Rom. 12:18-21.

Quotes

- Gospel: signifies good news. The good news that the gospel of the Christians came to announce to them is that their God is a God of wrath, that he has predestined the far greater number of them to hell-fire, that their happiness depends on their pious imbecility, their holy credulity, their sacred ravings, on the evil they do to one another through hatred of one another,...and on their antipathy for and persecution of all who do not agree with them or resemble them. *Voltaire*
- ...there is a face-off between the God of love and justice, and the God of judgment and wrath. Both may be found in the Old Testament. On the one hand we can read of a blazing, thunderous, blasting storm-God who strikes down in wrath all who fail to meet his demands. This jealous God of wrath is in contrast to a God of compassion, of a humane God who makes the rainbow promise not to destroy his people. This is God as rescuer, as redeemer, who is relenting and who is ever wooing his people and in whom there is plenteous forgiveness. . . God as male authority figure. God as lover. Images of God have consequences that matter. The conflicting images of God profoundly inform the present debate in the Church and its sex wars. *John M Gessell*

Questions

How does the caring God relate to the God of wrath? How do we react when goodness and love don't appear to follow us all the days of our lives? What is the real promise of Psalm 23? Should we actively seek out problems in life because we believe that we will be made better by these "crucible experiences"? What concepts of God result from such ideas?

Discussion/Comment

So what is God truly like? That's the fundamental question, and the many varieties of religion are the different answers. Most importantly, is God hostile or friendly? Like the soldier on sentry duty, the first thing to establish is "friend or foe"? When it comes to God, our answers are all too often ambivalent. Sometimes God seems friendly, sometimes not. So we end up confused or doubtful or reluctant. We don't want to commit to Someone we're not sure about.

Despite imagery that may not always speak well of God, let us hold on to the certainty of God as revealed in Jesus, and admit that if an aspect of our theology does not place God in a good light then it's probably wrong! For at the heart of the Great Controversy is the nature and character of God—so we should not be surprised that we have much theology to unlearn. If God's accuser is so keen to misrepresent God, then we should rather expect our ideas about God to be defective—even wrong. The Devil has promoted mistaken ideas about God for so long that we're predisposed to believe them. So let's take this opportunity to look again at God, and be prepared to re-examine those concepts about him that we seem to so readily accept. We have bought "a pig in a poke" when it comes to God-concepts. The seller is the Devil himself!

Psalm 23 is an acknowledged favorite of the Old Testament. Its familiar words can bring comfort without us even thinking about what they say. Try a re-read in a different version to re-discover the wonder of this God who cares so deeply about each of us. In this psalm of praise

David does not simply repeat the obvious. The God revealed here is up close and personal, and every word gives the lie to the Devil's wrongful claims and demonic misrepresentations.

V1. *My shepherd. I lack nothing. A very personal God who is the source of all the good we need.*

V2/3. The peace of God that passes our human concepts, because it is based on complete trust in the trustworthiness of our loving heavenly Father.

V 4. The answer to all our fears, despite the horrific experiences of life. God is the source of complete confidence.

V 5/6. God honors us because of who he is; he gives us more than we need! He is with us now, he will be with us forever; we choose to be with him eternally because of who he is.

Romans 12:18-21. Some questions arise here: in what way do we need to "make room for God's wrath"? And if we by acting kindly heap burning coals on our enemy's head, and that's what we wish, what does that say about the kind of people we are? What does the onlooking universe see in all of this? The great controversy is here—for goodness is in stark contrast to the valley of the shadow of death. In the darkness, the truth of God shines even brighter!

Ellen White Comments

"Go free, Ellen," said he; "return to your home trusting in Jesus, for He will not withhold His love from any true seeker." He then prayed earnestly for me, and it seemed that God would certainly regard the prayer of His saint, even if my humble petitions were unheard. I left his presence comforted and encouraged.

During the few minutes in which I received instruction from Elder Stockman, I had obtained more knowledge on the subject of God's love and pitying tenderness than from all the sermons and exhortations to which I had ever listened. I returned home and again went before the Lord, promising to do and suffer anything He might require of me, if only the smiles of Jesus might cheer my heart. The same duty was presented to me that had troubled my mind before—to take up my cross among the assembled people of God. An opportunity was not long wanting; there was a prayer meeting that evening, which I attended.

I bowed trembling during the prayers that were offered. After a few had prayed, I lifted up my voice in prayer before I was aware of it. The promises of God appeared to me like so many precious pearls that were to be received only for the asking. As I prayed, the burden and agony of soul that I had so long endured left me, and the blessing of the Lord descended upon me like the gentle dew. I praised God from the depths of my heart. Everything seemed shut out from me but Jesus and His glory, and I lost consciousness of what was passing around me.

The Spirit of God rested upon me with such power that I was unable to go home that night. When I did return, on the following day, a great change had taken place in my mind. It seemed to me that I could hardly be the same person that left my father's house the previous evening. This passage was continually in my thoughts: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." My heart was full of happiness as I softly repeated these words.

My views of the Father were changed. I now looked upon Him as a kind and tender parent, rather than a stern tyrant compelling men to a blind obedience. My heart went out toward Him in a deep and fervent love. Obedience to His will seemed a joy; it was a pleasure to be in His service. No shadow clouded the light that revealed to me the perfect will of God. I felt the assurance of an indwelling Saviour, and realized the truth of what Christ had said: "He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."

My peace and happiness was in such marked contrast with my former gloom and anguish that it seemed to me as if I had been rescued from hell and transported to heaven. {1T 30-1 }

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