

## GOD'S ACTIONS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

- A. Introduction: In this series we are talking about the fact that the second coming of Jesus is approaching and, just as the Bible predicts, we are seeing increasing turmoil in our country and around the world. II Tim3:1
1. We are taking time to look at what the Bible says about these developments. Understanding what is happening and why will help us have peace, hope, and joy in the midst of these challenging times.
    - a. The Bible refers to a time of wrath and judgment in connection with the Lord's return. Because many Christians have a lot of misunderstanding about the coming wrath of God, they are less than excited about the Lord's return.
    - b. Consequently, our main emphasis in this series has been on understanding what God's wrath (and judgment) actually is, according to the Bible. Many mistakenly believe that God's wrath is an emotional outburst at humanity because He has finally had enough of our sin.
      1. But God's wrath is not His emotional response to sin. It is His judicial response—His right and just response to sin. God responded to our sin at the Cross when Jesus took our place and was punished for our sin. The wrath due to us went to Him. Isa 53:4-5; Rom 4:25-5:1; etc.
      2. The New Testament never mentions the wrath of God in connection with Christians. Through Jesus we have been delivered from the wrath to come. Rom 5:9; I Thess 1:9-10; I Thess 5:9
  2. We have more to say about God's wrath and judgment when Jesus returns in upcoming lessons. But first, we need to take a brief side journey and talk about God's wrath in the Old Testament where it does seem that His wrath is indeed a violent explosion at sinful people. The God of the Old Testament seems very different from the loving God of the New Testament. How do we reconcile these seemingly contradictory pictures?
    - a. Rom 15:4—Paul wrote that the Old Testament was written in part to give us encouragement and hope. How do we find hope in what appear to be violent incidents described as the wrath of God?
    - b. We aren't going to look at every place in the Old Testament where the wrath of God is mentioned because time doesn't permit. Instead, we are examining a representative sample of incidents which give us some guidelines that will help us accurately interpret what we read in the Old Testament.
- B. The Bible is a unique book. It is actually a collection of sixty-six books and letters that altogether tell the story of God's desire for a family, and the lengths to which He has gone to obtain that family through Jesus.
1. The Bible is fifty-percent history. It is redemptive history. This means that the Bible relates information about people and events directly involved in God's unfolding plan of redemption—His plan to deliver sinners from sin, corruption, and death through the Cross of Christ.
    - a. The Old Testament is made up of thirty-nine books. Seventeen are historical books (Genesis through Esther). With the exception of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, these books are a record of the people group through whom Jesus came into this world—the descendants of Abraham who grew into the nation of Israel (also known as the Hebrews and the Jews).
    - b. These books cover a period of history from about 2086 BC when God called Abraham to leave his home land (modern day Iraq) and move to the land of Canaan (modern day Israel), up until 400 years before Jesus was born into this world.
    - c. The history of this people group is filled with some very dark chapters. They repeatedly abandoned the Lord to worship false gods and participate in gross immorality connected with the idol worship.
      1. During those dark times God sent numerous prophets to warn His people of coming destruction at the hands of their enemies if they did not turn from their idol worship back to Him. Seventeen Old Testament books were written by these prophets (Isaiah through Malachi).
      2. Israel repeatedly rejected God's many warnings through the prophets and, as a result, experienced the consequences of their horrific sin of idol worship—destruction of their nation

and removal from their homeland. That is exactly what happened. Deut 4:25-28

- d. To rightly interpret both the Old and New Testament we must remember that everything in the Bible was written by someone to someone about something. We must always think in terms of who wrote, who they were writing to, and why they were writing.
  1. Because people don't understand the historical context of the Old Testament they misapply passages written to Israel when they had abandoned God for idols.
  2. They wrongly apply them to sincere but struggling Christians, and presume that the troubles that come into their lives are expressions of God's wrath and judgment.
2. In the Old Testament many destructive events are connected to the Lord (such as Israel being overrun by their enemies), but not because He sent or caused the catastrophes.
  - a. Throughout the period described in the history and prophetic books, with the exception of Israel, the entire world was polytheistic (worshipped many gods). One of God's main purposes in the Old Testament was to reveal Himself to Israel and surrounding nations as the only Power, the only God
    1. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew which often uses a causative verb when a permissive sense is intended. God is said to do (causative) what He in fact only allowed.
    2. It is similar to an idiom in English where words are given another meaning. For example, we say: It's raining cats and dogs. If you understand English, you know that cats and dogs are not falling from the sky. Rather, it is raining heavily.
    3. The Hebrew text in the Old Testament literally says: God sent sickness among the people, but the original readers understood it to mean that God allowed sickness.
  - b. How can we who don't know the Hebrew language tell whether an Old Testament verse means that God did (caused, sent) something or that God allowed something?
    1. Sometimes it's obvious from the passage. I Chron 10:14 says that the Lord killed King Saul. But when we read the entire chapter we find that Saul asked his armor bearer to kill him.
    2. When the man refused, Saul fell on his own sword and killed himself (I Chron 10:4-5). The Lord did not kill Saul. The Lord allowed Saul to kill himself.
  - c. When we can't tell from the passage if God did or God allowed, we must assess the verse in terms of what Jesus shows us about God. We have to filter the Old Testament through the picture of God given to us in Jesus. John 14:9-10
    1. The Bible is progressive revelation. God has gradually revealed Himself and His plan to redeem mankind until He gave the full revelation in and through Jesus. Heb 1:1-3
    2. If an Old Testament verse says that God did something that is contrary to the revelation of God given to us by Jesus then we know the verse means that God allowed.
      - A. In Ex 15:26 God told Israel that if they obeyed Him He would not put the diseases of Egypt upon them because He is Jehovah Rapha, which means "the Lord your physician".
        1. God doesn't make people sick only to turn around and heal them. According to Jesus, that would be a house divided against itself. Matt 12:24-26
        2. In this verse God is saying "I will not allow the diseases of Egypt to come on you".
      - B. Jesus (who is God and shows us God) made no one sick or refused to heal anyone when He was on earth. If Jesus didn't make people sick only to turn around and heal them, then the Father doesn't do it. Jesus said: I only do what I see the Father do. John 5:19
3. God's purposes are redemptive. He is working to save, not destroy as many people as possible. In the Old Testament God was endeavoring to build into human consciousness the fact that sin destroys.
  - a. Israel's continued idol worship led to their defeat by the Babylonian Empire (586 BC). Jerusalem and the Temple were burned to the ground. Survivors were taken away as captives to Babylon.
    1. God did not delight in Israel's destruction. The prophet Isaiah called the fact that He allowed enemies to overcome His people God's strange or alien work. Isa 28:21; Josh 10:10

2. Jeremiah the prophet witnesses the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and wrote a sorrowful lament over it, in which he stated that God's heart was not in what happened—He does not willingly or from His heart afflict or grieve the children of men (Lam 3:33, Amp).
  - b. The Lord allowed His people to be overrun by their enemies, not because He is an angry, vindictive God, but because redemptive issues were involved. Israel had to be cured of idol worship.
    1. If these people would have permanently given themselves over to idol worship they would have lost their unique identity, God's Word Jesus will come through them would not have been fulfilled, and His plan of redemption thwarted. The destiny of the human race was at stake.
    2. God desired to wake Israel up to their need for Him before they experienced the ultimate destruction that comes from sin—eternal separation from God. The written record of what happened to them was and is meant to have the same effect on succeeding generations.
- C. Let's revisit an Old Testament incident that we mentioned a few weeks ago—the plagues of Egypt—and see if we can apply the principles of interpretation that we've listed above.
1. When Abraham settled in Canaan, he began his family. In the time of his great-grandchildren the entire family (75 in all) moved to Egypt for food during a period of severe famine. One of his great-grandsons, Joseph, was in charge of a food distribution program. Gen 37-50
    - a. The family grew rapidly and prospered. But eventually, after Joseph died, a king (pharaoh) came to power that was suspicious of Abraham's descendants and enslaved them. Why did this happen? Because that's life in a fallen world, a world damaged by sin. (For more information on this point, read my book: *Why Did This Happen? What Is God Doing?*)
      1. Egypt was the greatest power on earth at that time. Ancient Egypt existed as a separate country for almost 3,000 years (3100 BC to 332 BC). Their civilization lasted longer than any other in the history of the world.
      2. They had an enormous amount of gods. It would be impossible to list them all. Many towns had their own god. Everything in nature was believed to be indwelt by a spirit that could choose its own animal form. As a result, the Egyptians had many sacred animals and some of their gods had human bodies and animal head.
    - b. Eventually the time came for Abraham's descendants to return to Canaan, their homeland. God raised up a man named Moses to lead His people out of bondage and back to Canaan. The Old Testament books of Exodus and Numbers recount their deliverance and their journey.
      1. God sent Moses to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, with a message: Let My people go that they may serve me. Through a series of plagues the Lord persuades Pharaoh to release His people.
      2. People wonder how a good and loving God could send plagues on anyone. The plagues were demonstrations of God's power. In God's first statement about what He was going to do to Egypt He called them my wonders. Ex 3:20; Ex 4:21
        - A. The two Hebrew words used mean to do something wonderful, extraordinary, or difficult; a wonder, a display of God's power. The word in Ex 3:20 is used of Jesus in Isa 9:6.
        - B. The word plague (or a form of it) is used three times (Ex 9:14; Ex 11:1; Ex 12:13). It means a blow or an infliction. By analogy it means defeat.
      3. We hear this account with a 21<sup>st</sup> century western mindset. But the first readers heard the account of God's actions as: Our God is truly God. He is greater than all. He delivered us from bondage and defeated our enemies by His power.
  2. These wonders or power displays were direct challenges to the gods of Egypt (Ex 12:12). The Egyptians sacrificed a boy and a girl to the Nile each year. Yet, at the word of the Lord the Nile turned into blood. Frogs were sacred animals, but on God's word they overran the land. Ex 7:14-17; Ex 8:1-5
    - a. These plagues or power demonstrations were designed to show the Egyptians the True God so that

they would believe on Him. Many did so. Ex 8:9-10; Ex 8:19; Ex 9:19-21; Ex 12:36-38

- b. These power demonstrations were also designed to affect the Hebrews as well and to produce future confidence in God's power and protection. Ex 14:31; Deut 7:17-19
    1. These demonstrations occurred over a nine month period of time. Up until the last one, they were annoyances (as opposed to deadly)—water of the Nile turned to blood, frogs overran the countryside, lice, flies, disease killed the livestock, boils and sores, hail, locusts, thick darkness.
    2. The Egyptians could have missed any of these demonstrations of power at any time—as a group if Pharaoh had released Israel or as individuals by joining Israel. Israel was not affected by these wonders. Ex 8:22-23; Ex 9:4-7; 9:26; Ex 11:7; Ex 12:13
  - c. Some wrongly believe that God initiated the whole process by hardening Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh hardened his heart and God allowed it. I Sam 6:6
    1. Ex 4:21 is an example of a causative verb being used in a permissive sense: But I will let his heart wax bold and he will not suffer the people to go (Rotherham).
    2. In several places it specifically says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, along with some of his people (Ex 8:15; 32; Ex 9:34). The same sun that melts wax hardens clay.
  3. What about the final plague, the death of the firstborn (firstborn is from a word meaning chief Ex 14:30)?
    - a. The very first time Moses spoke to Pharaoh he told him that if Israel was not freed, the firstborn sons would die. Pharaoh had nine months of demonstrations of God's power and ability to fulfill His Word, to take the warning seriously—as well as one final warning. Ex 4:22-23; Ex 11:4-7
    - b. In the final plague protection came to those who were covered by the blood of the Passover lamb, a picture of the redemption that Jesus would one day provide. Ex 12; I Cor 5:7
      1. Ex 12:23—The Lord promised to keep the destroyer from harming those protected by blood. Note that destruction came from the destroyer. The devil is the destroyer, not God. John 10:10
      2. God connected this to Himself because He wanted all to see that destruction comes when you are out of relationship with Me due to idol worship.
      3. Theologians debate over the nature of the plagues, especially this final one (was it a disease, an epidemic) and miss the point—God is the deliverer of all who trust in Him.
    - c. Ex 14:24-28—What about the destruction of Pharaoh's entire army in the Red Sea? Egypt was an enemy of God's people. Canaan was about a two week trip from Egypt. Had the army survived, they could have easily pursued Israel and attacked them in the land. How many "deathbed conversions" to you think there were among the drowning soldiers?
  4. These power demonstrations reached well beyond Egypt and produced redemptive results. It took Israel forty years to get from Egypt to Canaan (more on that next week).
    - a. When Israel finally crossed the border into Canaan their first encounter was with the city of Jericho which they defeated and destroyed (more next week).
    - b. Two Hebrew spies sneaked into Jericho prior to the attack and encountered a woman named Rahab, a local prostitute living in a land populated by idol worshippers. Note two key points:
      1. Josh 2:9-11—Rahab revealed that God's power demonstrations in Egypt had caused her (and others in Canaan) to realize that Almighty God (Jehovah) is the Only, True God. As a result, she protected the Hebrew spies when their presence in the city was discovered.
      2. Rahab knew that Israel was going to conquer Jericho and she asked for mercy. They agreed. The sign that she was to be saved was a red cord hanging on her house (a picture or type of the blood of Christ). She and her family were saved. Josh 2:18-21; Josh 6:22-23
- D. Conclusion: If you come to a troubling incident in the Old Testament, don't throw out everything you know about God's goodness. Look for redemptive purposes in His actions. Lots more next week!