

THE PROBLEM OF GOD AND AN ETERNAL HELL Part 2

by Bob Vincent

LOST HUMANITY AND THE TRUTH

Several passages come to ones mind in thinking about the destiny of those who have never heard the gospel. The first is Romans 1:18-20: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."

Here we learn that every human being has a basic, latent knowledge of the true God. This knowledge exists not only in the glaring, compelling and conclusive evidence of the existence of a Supreme Being, Prime Mover, or First Cause in the very structure of reality outwardly, but is confirmed inwardly according to verse 19: "because that which is known about God is evident within them." In other words, this knowledge is not only *a posteriori*, but *a priori* as well. And it is very comprehensive knowledge according to verse 20, including the true nature of God's character, which according to Romans 2:14, 15, includes a basic sense of right and wrong: "Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them."

This knowledge is part of the very nature of a human being; it is contained within the broken and twisted remains of the image of God. But factual, compelling proof never stops people from doing evil: "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them" (Romans 1:32).

The problem is not a lack of conclusive evidence, but a deep-seated mental illness that has gripped every human being. Just as a woman pushes back the memory of her mother's boyfriend molesting her, so all humans repress this painful truth out of the conscious mind. But that repressed memory of the true God, guilt and coming judgment is still there, just as all painful childhood

memories are, and it haunts people in the dark night: "For God does speak — now one way, now another — though man may not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men as they slumber in their beds, he may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings, to turn man from wrongdoing and keep him from pride, to preserve his soul from the pit, his life from perishing by the sword" (Job 33:14-18).

The above truths have profound significance in how we deal with those whom we encounter outside the pale of the Church and means that so much of the proclamation is simply confirmation of truth that outsiders already know. It takes the work of the Holy Spirit to bring up this deeply buried knowledge, but he is pleased to honor the proclamation by doing so. What is not buried within and cannot be deduced from an analysis of the external evidence is God's loving act of grace in Jesus Christ, but the proclamation of the good news resonates as truth deeply within fallen man, plagued as he is by guilt and angst.

Such knowledge of God leaves people without excuse (Romans 1:20) but cannot save them from hell. However, and most importantly, people are not in hell simply because they did not respond to the gospel. They are in hell justly suffering for their countless acts of rebellion against God and ungratefulness toward his kindness. That someone has heard the gospel and spurned it only adds to his condemnation. There is eternal equity in all God's dealing with people: "That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows" (Luke 12:47, 48).

THE DOMINANT MOTIF IN THE NATURE OF GOD

Lastly, Scripture tells us that God's very nature is mercy and that while justice is part of God's character, his delight is love and mercy. This is seen in the most important text of the Old Testament, Exodus 34:5-7: "Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.'"

Exodus 34:5-7 is probably the central passage of the Old Testament and is quoted repeatedly by other Old Testament writers: e.g. Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2. The quotation in Jonah is very revealing in terms of God's disposition toward the heathen: "But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to Yahweh, 'O Yahweh, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so

quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” Jonah hated these northerners, the Assyrians, and he wanted to see their capitol destroyed. His reason for not bringing the message of God's offered mercy to them was that he knew God's character; he knew that God is love, quick to forgive anyone who turns from their sin to him. And Jonah knew this because he knew the message of the Torah, for the Torah is Yahweh's Direction, not only about how Israel ought to live under covenant with him, but also Direction pointing to him, who he is in his very essence, and that essence is loving kindness and delight in forgiveness. While it does not exclude judgment, even generational judgment, it focuses on mercy, kindness and forgiveness.

That is the message that we must take to those who have never heard the good news of Jesus Christ. For those who have never heard, whatever else may be true at the divine bar, they, too, will admit that their punishment is wholly deserved. But at that bar also stands a Savior who shed his blood for sin and the great Judge is one who is the God of Exodus 34.

HUMAN NATURE AND CHOICE

Here is the question: "If people are sinful by nature, then they have no choice but to act sinfully (i.e. commit acts of rebellion against God). If not, then we have no choice but to act sinfully. Therefore, how can you justly punish someone for acting in the only way they can?"

This is an ancient question, similar to the one with which Christ's holy apostle dealt in Romans 9. Paul, while recognizing the difficulties you raise, essentially responds by warning us that we cannot question God. This is not an answer that any of us modern folk, especially those of us in the West, are comfortable with. Our *weltanschauung*, the distorting glasses through which we look at the world and whose vision we naively assume conforms to reality, is radically egalitarian and radically individualistic: no one is superior or inferior to another; no one can be affected by the actions of another. We live in the days of the final outworking of the bastardization of the Democratic Ideal, and God himself must conform to our image.

Against such a view, the Scripture holds up a God who calls himself a despot (transliteration of the Greek word used of God and rulers with absolute power over others, e.g. Acts 4:24; Revelation 6:10) who is wholly righteous and all-powerful. Sin is so very serious and so very evil, fundamentally, not because of its impact on other human beings, but because it is an offense against his Majesty. This is what David confessed, dripping with bloody murder of a trusting friend and sordid adultery with his wife: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment" (Psalm 51:4).

Because God is God, we must shut our mouths and await the consummation when we will understand and accept all God's ways as holy and just. We must recapture the vision of the grandeur and greatness of God, as in the old Russian national anthem:

God The All Terrible! King, who ordainest
Thunder Thy clarion, the lightning Thy sword;
Show forth Thy pity on high where Thou reignest:
Give to us peace in our time, O Lord.

God the All-merciful! earth hath forsaken
Thy ways all holy, and slighted Thy word;
Bid not Thy wrath in its terrors awaken:
Give to us peace in our time, O Lord.

God the All-righteous One! Man hath defied Thee;
Yet to eternity standeth Thy word,
Falsehood and wrong shall not tarry beside Thee:
Give to us peace in our time, O Lord.

God the All-provident! Earth by Thy chastening,
Yet shall to freedom and truth be restored;
Through the thick darkness Thy kingdom is hastening:
Thou wilt give peace in Thy time, O Lord.
Amen.

Alexis F. Lvov

GOD AND JUSTICE

Justice is an interesting concept, and a key verse for understanding what the Bible means by it is Micah 6:8: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

This passage is very rich, and several Hebrew words stand out, but the word I want to pursue is *mishpat*, often translated by "justice." Two passages throw light on the underlying connotation of this interesting Hebrew word, Exodus 26:30 and 1 Kings 6:38.

Then you shall erect the tabernacle according to the plan (*mishpat*) for it that you were shown on the mountain (Exodus 26:30).

And in the eleventh year, in the month of Bul, which is the eighth month, the house was finished in all its parts, and according to all

its specifications (*mishpat*). He was seven years in building it (1 Kings 6:38).

Here we see that an underlying meaning in *mishpat* is conformity to specifications, in these two cases following the building plans. As we flesh out the meaning of *mishpat* inductively by studying the various contexts where it is found, a picture emerges: justice is conformity — in the case of morality, to the model of God's own holy nature, his character as he has revealed it as the pattern for human conduct. God reveals his own moral nature in two fundamental directives, loving God with the whole of our being and loving others as we love ourselves. These two directives are fleshed out in many commands; indeed, just as a door hangs and swings on its hinges, the entire Old Testament hangs on these two commandments (Matthew 22:34-40).

The Ten Commandments are not independent of God, as if he were bound by some abstract moral principle that is above him and separate from his existence; rather they refract the very character of God himself, his own morality. In effect, they codify, within the ethos and milieu of Israel in the Second Millennium before Christ, God's own moral character. A beautiful analogy to this is found in how a prism refracts light into its various colors. These commandments are right simply because they are consistent with who God is. In other words, murder, adultery and stealing would not be wrong if they were not contrary to God's own nature; were there no God, there would be no right and no wrong. As Dostoevsky said, "If God does not exist, then everything is permitted."

This moral nature of God stamped on the human soul is part of what it means for us to be created in the image of God, an image that was radically marred, gnarled, broken and twisted in the fall, but not completely lost. In the fall, man lost more than a gift of super-added grace (*donum superadditum*); rather, the totality of his being, including his intellect, was radically affected by sin. Humankind is totally but not utterly depraved; man is not as bad as he can possibly be. There remains in fallen man the shattered image of God, including moral judgment because humankind is created in the image of God and thereby finitely mirrors God's own knowledge, righteousness and holiness. (Genesis 1:26; Colossians 3:10; Ephesians 4:24) That is to say, even lost people have an innate, intuitive, instinctive sense of right and wrong, based not on experience, nor as an internalized parent — a Freudian superego — but as part of the very essence of what it is to be human.

This knowledge of the true God and of his character exhibits itself imperfectly in the human conscience: "For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them . . ." (Romans 2:14, 15). This remnant of the image of God is why

even non-Christian people struggle with a sense of indignation at the injustices all around them.

As odd as it may seem, the very reason why human beings recoil at some of the ways of God is because we are all created in his image. It is why humans not only fear hell, but also are also repulsed by the very idea of the eternal, conscious suffering of sentient beings. Unregenerate humans act in defiance of God, judging him by their own independent, autonomous intellects and emotions. Nevertheless, behind that rebellion is a testimony to the remnant of God's own moral character stamped on the soul of every human being, a divine sense of right and wrong, *mishpat*, justice, conformity to the specifications of the Builder.

The Lord Jesus, as the Second Adam, is pre-eminently Man in the Image of God, restoring what was lost to us by our first father. (1 Corinthians 15:45-49; Ephesians 4:20-24; Colossians 3:9-11) In him, in the fullness of time, all believers will be fully restored to the image of God. Then, and only then, will justice be fully understood. Then, and only then, will justice truly be rendered:

But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God (1 Corinthians 4:3-5).

Until that Day, all justice in this world is at best a stab in the dark. For not truly knowing our own hearts (Jeremiah 17:9), we are incapable of rendering just judgment on others, not only humans, but first and foremost, on him who is the very Archetype of Justice. To sit in judgment of God is the most brazenly arrogant and naively foolish thing fallen man can do.

Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.

Bold shall I stand in Thy great day,
For who aught to my charge shall lay?
Fully absolved from these I am,
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.

