

God's Timeless Wisdom

Is God a Moral Monster? - part 4

April 29, 2018

DAY 1: Understanding the Old Testament

1. It goes without saying that the world in the middle east, several thousand years ago, was harsh and strange to us. It is worth trying to understand how the bible addressed the issues of the different eras it covered.

2. Over a fifteen-hundred-year period of time, the bible did two things simultaneously: it gave us BOTH timeless wisdom AND addressed the issues of each of the eras in real time.

The law of Moses: inferior and provisional

3. In the following verses, the bible is referred to as "the law."

Romans 7:7 What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed, I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet."

4. What does Paul say the bible did for him?

5. Without God's law, we would not have an objective standard with which to see clearly the realities of good and evil in our lives. We are largely blind to our sin.

6. But our human nature is determined to sin. It will find any excuse to do so. For example, if you tell your child not to put something into the electric socket, it won't be long before they figure out some way to do the very thing you warned them about! And they'll try to sneak it right by you.

7. Paul says the same thing happens when we, as adults, read God's law:

Romans 7:8 But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire.

8. Well, you say, maybe it would be better if we didn't have God's word. Nope. With God's word at least we can begin to recognize the evil that lies within us. The problem is not the bible. The problem is our human nature.

Romans 7:12 So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

9. The bible is clear. Human nature needs more than just a standard of right and wrong. As good as the standard is, we really need a new heart, that won't rebel against the standards of God.

Ezekiel 36:26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

DAY 2: Incremental steps toward the ideal

1. God's law meets human nature, and by human nature, the technical term is, "the hardness of the human heart."

2. Some of the issues in that ancient middle eastern culture were polygamy, warfare, slavery, a severe crushing of women, among many broken and fallen social arrangements. How are those to be broken in real time? By demanding the ideal? How does that work with human nature?

3. Have you ever told an addict to, "just quit"?

4. Let's take the topic of marriage. God upholds a timeless standard, and works with the people where they are.

Genesis 2:24 For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

5. The timeless standard for marriage is one man to one woman for life.

6. But in the middle eastern culture of four thousand years ago, men could divorce a woman for the flimsiest of reasons, which would usually leave her in abject poverty. That same culture is still in place in some places in the middle east!

7. Jesus is asked about this question of divorce.

Matthew 19:3 Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

⁴ "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,'⁵ and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? ⁶ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

⁷ "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

⁸ Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning."

a. How did Jesus uphold God's timeless standard?

b. How did God work with the fallen culture to help move them toward the ideal?

DAY 3: The redemptive movement of scripture

1. You may ask, does this approach of gradual incrementalism (baby steps) approve of relativism? Hardly.
2. Again, think about raising your own children. You keep timeless ideals before them, but encourage them to take the next baby steps in front of them.
3. Just because your kids take baby steps toward the ideal doesn't mean your standards are relative.
4. Let's take the example of slavery.

Genesis 1:26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

5. The timeless ideal of humanity can be summarized in these two verses. Because we are made in the image of God, we have dignity. That we are all equal before our Creator means we all have equal worth, and are to treat each other as a creature of God, made in His image.

6. But around the world, slavery was "a way of life," an institution firmly planted in nearly every culture. You could summarize the thinking in these ways:

- a. A slave was seen as property, a thing, a commodity.
- b. The slave owner had full rights over the slave, not just over his working hours but over his whole life, including his family.
- c. The slave was often treated like property. He could be bought and sold, his family could be broken up, he could be whipped, etc.

7. God's ideals, though real, made little dent in the hardness of human hearts. What could God do? In different eras, God gave instructions to:

- a. Slave holders and the culture – to take incremental steps away from the fallen structure of slavery toward God's ideals.
- b. Slaves, who found themselves as slaves with no legal recourse.

(We will deal with this issue in more depth in a few weeks).

DAY 4: Israel's history; different stages, different demands

1. The bible covers some of history all the way back to the beginning of the universe. (Genesis 1)
2. It also is written, covering man's history going back to Adam and Eve.
3. Israel's history goes back about four thousand years.
4. The bible covers about two thousand years of Israel's history.

5. Within these two millennia, Israel passes through five distinct stages. (After each stage are some verses representative of that era).

a. The wandering clans.

Genesis 10:31 These are the sons of Shem by their clans and languages, in their territories and nations. ³² These are the clans of Noah's sons, according to their lines of descent, within their nations. From these the nations spread out over the earth after the flood.

b. A theocratic people and a theocratic nation.

Genesis 12:2 "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

Exodus 3:7 The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.

c. Monarchy, the rule of a king.

1 Samuel 24:20 I know that you will surely be king and that the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hands.

d. People of the exile (those taken into exile and the remnant, those not taken into exile).

Jeremiah 29:10 This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

¹⁴ I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD,

e. The post-exilic people.

Ezra 8:35 Then the exiles who had returned from captivity sacrificed burnt offerings to the God of Israel: ...

6. In each period, God communicated something of His timeless ideals, as well as dealing with the people toward baby steps of change.

DAY 5: The difference between what ought to be and what is

1. I remember reading through the bible for the first time as a junior and senior in college. I was hungry to learn. But I was often confused when I read the Old Testament because I naturally expected to see stellar role models for me to follow, and heroes of the faith.

2. Instead what I was reading were accounts of people that sometimes failed miserably. Other folks had moments of both greatness and shocking failure.

3. After a while it seemed that the bible was a collection of accounts of people that could fail in about every imaginable way there was to fail.

4. A shift began to occur in my understanding of the bible. I remember being stopped in my tracks. If these kinds of epic failures could happen to the “best” of people, what gave me any confidence that I could not succumb to my own brand of epic failure?

5. The next general trend I began to become aware of was stunning. What led each of these “should be stalwarts” into their own brands of falling short? Why?

6. Reading the bible is like looking into the hearts of so many different people to see the same similarities of the nature of sin that led to heartache, moral failure, broken relationships, etc.

7. A shift in understanding began again. The point was less, “how can I be a hero of the faith?” to “Wow, I am going to sin, and fall short of not only God’s ideal standards but also my own human standards. God knows that, and still, miraculously, offers me mercy, His long-suffering patience with me, His unmovable loyalty and faithfulness to me in spite of the spiritual loser I sometimes am.

8. What am I to make of the heroes of the faith? They are not commended because of their stellar perfection in following God, victory after victory. People like Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David are commended because in spite of their personal defeats and moral failings, they continue to pursue God, and the purposes of God.

Proverbs 24:16 A righteous man falls seven times and gets up, but the wicked are overthrown by calamity.