

The Holiness of God: The Trauma of Holiness, part 3

Leviticus 10:1-3; 2 Samuel 6:3-8

The history of American preaching has gone from man is very bad and God is very mad in the eighteenth century, to God isn't so mad and mankind isn't so bad in the nineteenth century, to man is bad and God is mad again in the twentieth century. In the twentieth century, we have the rise of "crises theology" and the emphasis on "judgement."

The "Shadow Side" of God

Some extremists in the crisis theology group saw in the Old Testament an expression of something that is *irrational* in the character of God. They saw that God's anger is not so much a manifestation of His righteousness or of His holiness as it is *a manifestation of a defect within God's own character*. Some of these theologians teach about a "shadow side" of God—a demonic element in His character seen in what appears to be sudden, unprovoked exhibits of a whimsical, capricious, arbitrary anger; that is there is no rhyme or reason to his anger.

Nadab and Abihu Consumed

Leviticus 10:1-2 This terse description of the death of Aaron's sons seems to justify the irrational, demonic nature that some see in God. God's wrath seen in this act seems capricious and arbitrary. There is no rhyme or reason for it.

There is a reason for it. In Exodus 29-31, God consecrated Aaron and his sons as priests in Israel. He gave instruction on what was necessary to approach God in His holiness and in their worship of Him. All these instructions were to show the people that God is holy, and they are not. The people were to respect the symbols and obey these commandments, teaching them to revere holy God. They needed to learn how to approach him. So, these young priests do something wrong, perhaps in an immature, adolescent way, fooling around, and then without warning, God strikes them dead.

Aaron is understandably upset, but Moses reminds him that there are certain principles that are non-negotiable in being a priest. God will be regarded as holy by anyone who dares to presume to minister in God's name. Before the people God will be treated with reverence. Aaron said no more.

Uzzah Struck Dead

2 Samuel 6 The narrative of Uzzah, the Kohathite, during the transfer of the Ark of the Covenant from the hands of the Philistines to Jerusalem. The Ark of the Covenant was the throne of God. It was the most sacred vessel in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple.

The Ark of the Covenant was being transported on an oxcart. The Kohathites, (Uzzah), were walking beside it. One of the oxen stumbled, and the cart began to tilt. It looked as if this holy vessel of Israel was about to slide into the mud and be desecrated. So instinctively, Uzzah used his hand to steady the Ark, to make sure that it would not fall into the mud. As soon as Uzzah touched the holy Ark of God, God struck him dead.

Most people cannot believe that God would do such a thing. It is unthinkable that God Himself could have anything to do with the death of Uzzah. Yet, if we look carefully at the Old Testament and see the history of the Kohathites, I think the answer is made apparent to all of us.

More Polluted Than Dirt

The tribe of Levi was set apart for God; they would be responsible for the priesthood, and the matters of the Temple and education. Within the tribe of Levi, each family was given a particular task. Kohath was one of the sons of Levi, and God separated the family of Kohath to take care of the sacred vessels. Number 4:1-20

They were trained and disciplined in the details of the law of God about how these sacred objects and vessels were to be treated. The one absolute, non-negotiable principle that every Kohathite had learned was this: never, ever touch the throne of God. God said, "If you touch it, you die." Numbers 4:15

Here is the problem: When the Ark of the Covenant was being transported, it was to be transported on foot. There were loops at the edge of the throne, through which stays were inserted to make sure that no human hand touched the throne. In this instance, because they were in a hurry, and they put the Ark on the oxcart. And when the ox stumbles and the Ark is going down, Uzzah did the unthinkable—he touched the throne of God.

Uzzah committed a presumptuous sin: *he assumed that his hands were less polluted than the dirt*. There was nothing about the earth that would desecrate the throne of God. The dirt was doing what God called it to do. It

was obeying the laws of God for dirt. There is nothing defiling about the earth. It was the hand of sin-defiled mankind that God said, “I don’t want it on this throne.” Uzzah broke the law of God, and God killed him.

Marcions All Over the Place

In the Pentateuch, you will see the list of capital crimes that are set forth in Israel. There are over thirty offenses for which God commanded the death penalty—not only for first-degree murder, but also for homosexual acts and adultery. If a child was unruly in public and sassed his parents, he could be put to death. It was a capital crime for an Israelite to go to a fortuneteller. Many people today, including Christians find this too harsh. When Marcion attempted to put the canon of Scripture together, he left out the Old Testament and most of the Gospels, with only a few remarks of the Apostle Paul. Marcion’s working principle was this: any reference to the God of the Old Testament, Jehovah, couldn’t possibly be sacred Scripture because Jesus, in the New Testament, reveals a different deity from that explosive, hot-tempered, ill-willed deity that thundered in the Old Testament. Too many Christians operate under this same principle. The Old Testament seems too severe.

Cosmic Treason

Hans Kung, in his book, *Justification*, sheds light on the seeming injustice of God’s wrath. The real mystery of sin is not that a holy and righteous God should exercise justice. The real mystery is why God, through generation after generation, tolerates rebellious creatures who commit cosmic treason against His authority. Even though there are thirty-some capital offenses in the Old Testament, this doesn’t represent a cruel and unusual form of justice at the hands of God. *It already represents a massive reduction in the number of capital crimes.* The rules that were set forth at creation. He gave mankind the highest status and the greatest blessing and gift, which He did not owe them at all—the very gift of life—and stamped His holy image on them. And He said, “The soul that sins shall die.”

All sin in creation was viewed as a capital offense. “The day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17).

No one can convict a holy, perfectly righteous creator, who out of sheer mercy creates a creature and gives him all this blessing? There is nothing wrong with God extinguishing a creature who has the audacity to challenge His authority to rule His creation. Have you ever considered what is involved in the slightest sin?

Even the slightest sin defies the authority of God, insults the majesty of God, and challenges the justice of God. We are so accustomed to sinning and so careful to justify our disobedience that we have become recalcitrant in our hearts. Our consciences have been seared, and we think it no serious matter to disobey the King of the universe. It is cosmic treason.

Gracious Forbearance

Dr. Küng goes on to say, instead of destroying mankind in the moment of revolt and rebellion against His authority, God reached forth and extended His mercy. Instead of justice, He poured out His grace. The history of the Old Testament is the history of repeated episodes that showed God’s gracious forbearance and merciful forgiveness towards a people who disobeyed Him day in, day out.

God’s forbearing mercy is designed to give us time to repent, but instead of repenting, we exploit it. So, we come to think that God doesn’t care if we sin, or even if He does care, there’s nothing He can do about it. We become so accustomed to God’s normal patterns of grace and mercy that we not only begin to take it for granted, but we also begin to assume it, to demand it, and then if we don’t get it, we’re furious.

Anybody Want Justice?

There is a difference between justice and mercy. The minute you think that God owes you mercy, you’re thinking about justice. Mercy is voluntary. God is never obligated to be merciful to a rebellious creature. He doesn’t owe you mercy. As He has said, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy” (Rom. 9:15).

God is Never Unjust

A holy God is both just and merciful, but never unjust. There is never an occasion in any page of Scripture where God ever punishes an innocent person. God simply doesn’t know how to be unjust. You and I should thank Him every night that He does know how to be non-just; because mercy is non-justice, but it is not injustice.

Never ask God to give you justice. You may perish as swiftly as the people we saw today. We live by grace, by His mercy. Never forget that.