

The background of the cover is a scenic landscape. On the left, a large, light-colored rock formation (likely El Capitan) rises vertically. In the foreground, a river flows, reflecting the sky and the surrounding environment. The sky is a clear, deep blue. The overall scene is peaceful and majestic.

TROY J. EDWARDS

UNDERSTANDING
HEBREW
IDIOMATIC &
FIGURATIVE
LANGUAGE

To Vindicate the Loving Character of God

Understanding Hebrew
**Idiomatic &
Figurative
Language**

To Vindicate the Loving Character of God

By Troy J. Edwards

Vindicating God Ministries

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *King James Version* (KJV) of the Bible.

Understanding Hebrew Idiomatic & Figurative Language

To Vindicate the Loving Character of God

Troy J. Edwards

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Dedicated to
Cullen and Gina Ohashi

*It was under your ministry I was given
numerous and ample opportunities to
develop in ministry.*

Chapter One

Why Study Idioms and Figurative Expressions?

Disregard of the peculiarities of the Hebrew idiom has been another source of error, so that symbols and idioms have combined to produce false impressions, and to originate false notions.¹ (Thomas Spalding)

Idioms are words that are unique to a particular language, culture and group of people, or, as another has defined it, “An idiom is an expression that is different from the literal meaning of the words.”² One online dictionary offers this definition: “An idiom is a saying, phrase, or fixed expression in a culture that has a figurative meaning different from its literal meaning.”³

The Bible abounds in “idioms” or “figurative language” (aka “figures of speech”) and the meaning is not always apparent to Bible readers unfamiliar with the background and culture of those anointed mediums through whom God communicated His message.

Examples of Cultural Idioms

In the English-speaking world, we have numerous idioms that, if interpreted *literally* in another language would lose their *literal* meaning. Growing up in a predominantly African American community in the 1970s and 1980s, many of our parents, when warning of discipline, used the expression, “I will slap you into next week.” Interpreting this expression word-for-word into another language might give someone the false idea that our parents believed that a “slap” was a mode of time

travel into the future. Instead, it only meant you might get a harder slap than usual if you continue misbehaving.

Another of many idioms is the use of the word “bad” when expressing something great about a person. A good fighter or someone that excelled in a particular sport was referred to as “a bad dude” or “a bad brother.” Translating that into another language would lead one to believe that we were referring to the person as *evil*.

This is why competent language translation requires not only a working knowledge of the languages, but also a grasp of the time period and distinctive cultural expressions, generally known as “idioms.”

God Conveyed His Word Through Men

Those of us who believe that the Bible is God’s written revelation to man are in no doubt that it is supernaturally given to man by God:

All that is written in the holy writings comes from the Spirit of God. The holy writings are good for these things: to teach people, to show them when they are wrong, to make them see what is right, to teach them to do what is right. (2 Tim. 3:16; Worldwide English New Testament)

The Contemporary English Version reads, “*Everything in the Scriptures is God’s Word.*” The Holy Spirit Himself gave us the Bible and it is God’s written revelation to men (John 10:35). Nonetheless, the Holy Spirit worked through the medium of human agency:

Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy

men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. (2 Peter 1:20-21)

Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake before concerning Judas, which was guide to them that took Jesus. (Acts 1:16)

God had no other choice but to convey His message using the manner in which these imperfect creatures communicated with each other.⁴ As one scholar noted, “For when the Deity has condescended to speak by the mouth of men, he has always left them to use the modes of expression current and intelligible in the age in which they lived.”⁵

The men God communicated His message through lived in what is known as the Ancient Near East. It is important to keep in mind that their forms of expressions are different from our Western forms by both time, distance and culture. As A. T. Pierson explained:

Every language has its idioms, peculiar meanings attaching to words, which undergo modifications in time, and change with periods. Individual authors also have their modes of expression so that to ascertain the sense in which words are used is often a necessary clew to style and sense. The Scriptures use words and phrases in a way of their own, and we must discern this to make interpretation accurate and authoritative.⁶

The Bible is certainly God’s inspired and inerrant Word but it is *not* a Western book. It is an “Eastern” one—an “Ancient Near Eastern” book. It is important to not only keep this in mind when studying Scripture but we must take the time to understand the figures of speech

of its contributors to get a correct understanding of the truths God desires to have disseminated to all mankind:

The employment of a figurative style by the inspired lips and pens of the messengers of heaven, indicates the merciful condescension of God to the ignorance and weakness of man, more especially in the earlier ages of the world, when a deficiency of words originated symbolical language. The propriety, design, and beauty, however, of this style, will not be fully apparent without an intelligent consideration of the countries in which the inspired poets flourished; the peculiar idioms of their speech; and the simple manners of their inhabitants.⁷

Our loving God chose to convey His Word to mankind by accommodating Himself to the culture and phraseology of His yielded vessels in the time period in which they lived. It is our responsibility to learn their modes of expression in order to fully understand the teaching of Scripture.

The Reason for Bible “Difficulties”

In his “Illustrated Bible Dictionary,” William Coleman Piercy described the primary style of the Old Testament: “The O.T. is mainly in Hebrew, a simple, massive, yet graphic language, possessing a remarkable wealth of words and idioms, and peculiarly suited for the purpose it had to fulfil.”⁸

Our disregard for Hebrew idioms and figures of speech is the main source of so-called “Bible contradictions” and “Bible difficulties.” This is not limited to the Old Testament. Our inattention to these details has affected the understanding of the New Testament as well:

The Greek of the New Testament, also, is much affected, by the incorporation of Hebrew idioms. These and many other circumstances have created difficulties; and these difficulties often assume the form of apparent contradictions.⁹

The Greek of the New Testament is likewise much affected by the incorporation of Hebrew idioms— All these circumstances, and many others that might be enumerated, combine to create difficulties; and these difficulties often assume the form of apparent contradiction.¹⁰

The fact must ever be remembered that, while the language of the New Testament is Greek, the agents and instruments employed by the Holy Spirit were Hebrews.... While therefore, the words are Greek, the thoughts and idioms are Hebrew.... The New Testament Greek abounds with Hebraisms; i.e. expressions conveying Hebrew usages and thoughts in Greek words.¹¹

Other scholars have observed that the neglect of Hebrew idioms, which has resulted in Bible difficulties, has provided ammunition to the Bible's detractors:

These have been adduced as specimens of the objections urged by infidel writers against the Scriptures, and of the ease with which they may be met. For others of a similar kind, and for answers to objections founded upon supposed contradictions between different passages of Scripture, reference must be made to commentators. (7) With respect to all of them, it has been well observed, "that a little skill in the original languages of the Scriptures, their idioms and properties, and in the times, occasions, and scope of the several books, as well as in the antiquities and customs of those countries which were the scenes of the transactions recorded, will always clear the main difficulties."¹²

Nonetheless, these so-called “contradictions” and “difficulties” can be avoided if our Bible hermeneutic would include a knowledge of Hebrew idioms and figurative language. Thomas Spalding well wrote:

The Hebrew language, like most others, has many idioms, i.e. modes of expression peculiar to itself. These must be discerned and understood by the Scripture student, or the meaning of the inspired writer will not be apprehended. Many supposed contradictions in the Bible are the result of interpreting Hebrew idioms as ordinary English expressions. Correct principles of interpretation would disclose to us harmony and beauty, where we often imagine there is contradiction or inconsistency.¹³

Many of the “Bible difficulties” that we encounter are not due to any mysterious purposes on the Holy Spirit’s part. They are the failure to transmit Hebrew idiomatic expressions properly.

Negative Impact of the KJV

It is plausible to suppose that our Bible translators’ fault was not a lack of knowledge of the original languages in which the Bible was written. However, as others have pointed out, many of them lacked a thorough understanding of the idioms of the culture from which the Bible sprang. Concerning the 1611 King James Bible translators:

Of course their scholarship was not impeccable: their text was still poor, the New Testament not yet based on the chief uncials; their knowledge of Hebrew, for example of tenses and idioms, was still defective and they had no papyri to help them with the Greek koine; They incurred Broughton’s wrath for timidly relegating numerous correct renderings to the margin.¹⁴

Concerning the Hebrew idiom, it is written that one scholar charged “.... upon King James’ translators, either an ignorant or wilful neglect of this very idiom, which he declares to be all important in a faithful translation.”¹⁵

Part of the problem with the King James Version is its obvious Calvinistic bias. This very bias is the leading factor behind the neglect of understanding and incorporating Hebrew idioms into its translation.¹⁶ Their adherence to a *literal* rendering of these idioms were more conducive to their false ideas about God’s sovereignty. However, a *literal* translation of idioms without the understanding of their original meaning and intention is not an *accurate* or “faithful” translation:

King James’ Version and the Revised Version, following it, time and time again, transfer both the Hebrew and Greek idioms into English, instead of translating them into their equivalent modern English idioms Both the Revised Version and King James’ Version, then, are very often nothing more than a transliteration of the original, instead of being a translation Such a translation will not be a servile word for word translation. “A faithful translator,” as the Poet Horace has so well asserted, “will not make a word for word translation.” For every language has its own peculiar and, so to speak, domestic genius. For the purpose of rendering the true meaning of a foreign phrase, therefore, it is often necessary to modify the order of the words, the form of the phrase, and the whole expression of it. In other words, **A word for word translation often obscures the meaning of the original instead of translating it truly.**¹⁷
(Emphasis added)

There is no benefit to translating idioms word-for-word when it only serves to bring about confusion. It is

written, “*For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints*” (1 Cor. 14:33).

Meaning-for-Meaning

Literal translations have their place. They can be beneficial in some respects to see how words were used among the original writers of Scripture. Nonetheless, many “word-for-word” renderings of Hebrew idioms have given rise to ideas about God that were never intended by the writers of Scripture. This is why such exact literalness must be avoided in translation:

In transferring the sense of the Holy Scriptures into another language, there can scarcely be too close an adherence to the phraseology of the Original. The latitude sometimes assumed in translations is another thing, which has tended, perhaps in no small degree, to delay the revival, in later days, of an accurate knowledge of the Hebrew. Our English Authorised Version indeed is peculiarly excellent in its general correctness. Yet even here a more scrupulous observance, in some respects, of the *Idioms* of the Hebrew no less than of the radical ideas of the words, might have been attended with considerable advantage. And had our wise and venerable Translators been aware that they possessed, at the time, almost unlimited authority in the English language;—that they had it in their power to determine, not only what were, and what were not, her Idioms, but also what should thenceforward be adopted as such;—they might have translated yet more literally, and have infused into our Version still more of that strength and precision of the Original, which even now so justly mark its value. And in proportion as this mode of translation is departed from in modern attempts at improvement, so far is the meaning of the Original Hebrew weakened and obscured; while the practice authorises a neglect of the most important minutiae in its construction.¹⁸

If rendering the idiom word-for-word brings such unnecessary complications then wouldn't the best practice be to understanding the original purpose of the idiom and render it meaning-for-meaning for the modern English reader? Some scholars do not see any harm in doing so:

Confined to figures of speech and linguistic idioms, or even extended to the verbal channel through which their ideas are conveyed, no harm can result from turning the sentences of Apostles into corresponding modern ones; on the contrary, this must be done if the Bible is to be understood.¹⁹

Those called to teach God's Word must avail themselves of the many modern translations and paraphrases now available (many are freely available online). More importantly, one who teaches Scripture is obligated to become familiar with the cultural idioms of the ancient Hebrews. A "teacher" is an "interpreter" of Scripture (Neh. 8:7-8; Luke 24:27) and can only teach it accurately when they understand its original doctrines:

*In the doctrines of religion, the Hebrew idiom is to be specially regarded. An interpreter should particularly observe, that when things appropriate to religion, especially to the Christian religion, are spoken of, the idiom should be referred to the Hebrew; because in speaking of religious matters, the writers of the New Testament were accustomed to use the phraseology of the Hebrew Scriptures. The interpreter will be much assisted here by the analogy of doctrine; with which he ought to be familiar, lest the words of the New Testament should be drawn to a sense alien from that which the authors desired to express, and different from the essential points of religion.*²⁰

If one is unfamiliar with the original intent of Scripture then one will begin teaching doctrines that,

while appearing to have Scriptural backing when citing an obscure text, is, for all intents and purposes, *unscriptural*. Many of the damaging views concerning God's character is the result of ignorance of Biblical idiomatic and figurative language. The only means by which we can avoid confusion when studying Scripture and understand God's written revelation correctly is to have a knowledge of the idioms and figurative expressions of its original contributors:

The language of the biblical writers is marked by an abundance of peculiar imagery, alien to our modes of thought and expression, and in order not to misunderstand its meaning, it is necessary to acquire an intelligent acquaintance with its idiom. To read it aright, we must habituate ourselves to its peculiar forms of speech, and learn the art of instinctively measuring aright the force of its figures.²¹

God's Word was meant to give us an understanding *that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all*" (1 John 1:5). If there are places in Scripture in which God appears to be dark (evil), then it is neither the fault of God or the vessel through whom He conveyed His Word. The blame lies with our failure to render Hebrew idioms in a way that is intelligible to our modern understanding.

In this book we will look specifically at idioms and figurative language that, when misunderstood, makes God appear to be the author of evil, full of unhealthy emotions, and exhibits tyrannical and vindictive behavior. We believe that this book will show you how beautiful, wonderful, loving and trustworthy God truly is. You will also see that the Bible, when understood correctly, can be trusted for what it truly is—God's written revelation to mankind.

Chapter Two

Figurative Language Misunderstood

It is not only important to ascertain when an expression is figurative; but equally important to interpret figures by corresponding and appropriate terms. To attain this object, we should inquire in what respects the thing compared, and that with which it is compared, agree.¹ (John Bate)

As a result of the failure to distinguish between the literal and the idiomatic or figurative in the Scripture, flawed theological systems and inaccurate conceptions about God's character are still prevalent today. Sadly, it is not just a modern-day concern; this was a problem even in the time that our Lord was on earth.

Building the Temple in Three Days

Our Lord's fraudulent trial before being hanged on the cross serves as a superb illustration of how to make something untrue out of a genuine statement:

*And there arose certain, and bare **false witness against him**, saying, We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands. (Mark 14:57-58)*

As He hung dying on that cross, this baseless accusation was made against Him to discredit Him and increase His suffering: "*And they that passed by railed on him, wagging their heads, and saying, Ah, thou that*

destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days” (Mark 15:29). Jesus did, in fact, make this assertion. Why then would Mark, acting under the guidance of God, characterize it as an unfounded charge against Him?

Despite quoting a correct statement spoken by our Lord, these “witnesses” and the mockers at the cross must be viewed as fraudulent since they failed to recognize that He was speaking *figuratively* rather than *literally*:

*Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days? **But he spake of the temple of his body.** When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said. (John 2:19-22)*

Jesus was persistently pressed for a sign during his earthly ministry to establish His legitimacy (John 2:18; Matt. 16:1-4). The three-day event that would occur between His death and His resurrection, which He once referred to as the sign of Jonas, was the only sign, though, that Jesus was ready to share with these nonbelievers (Matt. 12:38-40). They would have had the right impression if these bogus witnesses had linked Jesus’ sign about the destruction of the temple with His sign regarding Jonas. Instead of exploring His meaning, they opted for a literal interpretation in order to level unfounded accusations.

For those who follow the New Testament, it might be a little clearer that when Jesus spoke of the temple, He was referring to His own body. In addition to John

revealing His precise meaning, the Apostle Paul provided us with a full explanation of how the body is comparable to the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19-20; 2 Cor. 6:16-17). But anyone who had taken the initiative to delve deeper into the Lord's meaning rather than just hunting for evidence to use against Him may have learned this truth (Jer. 31:33; Eze. 11:19; 36:26-27; 37:14).

Did Jesus Teach Cannibalism?

Another instance of our Lord employing figurative language was when He described Himself as the "living bread" whose body is to be consumed:

I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? (John 6:51-52)

Jesus continued, "*Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you*" (v. 53). Those who took our Lord's statements literally were naturally perplexed by this. Because they failed to grasp the Lord's figurative meaning, our text states that "*From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him*" (John 6:66).

But if these Jews had remembered God's commandment against consuming blood (Lev. 3:17; 7:26-27; 17:10-12; 19:26) and Jesus' reverence for the law of God (Matt. 4:4; 5:17; Luke 10:25-27), they might well have made an effort to understand Jesus' meaning rather than taking it literally.

Furthermore, they would not have missed the Lord's meaning if they had paid attention to everything He had to say. In context Jesus said, "*Verily, verily, I say unto you, **He that believeth on me hath everlasting life. I am that bread of life***" (John 6:47-48). In other words, the act of "eating" and "drinking" was symbolic of faith in and relationship with Christ (John 6:34-36; 3:16-18; 2 Cor. 5:17). They frequently used this idiom in their own Scriptures (Deut. 8:3; Job 23:12; Ps. 119:103; Jer. 15:16; Eze. 3:1-3). Therefore, it is inexcusable that they misinterpreted the Lord.

Many self-described Christians still practice this behavior today. They will read and study the Bible without seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance. They see Hebrew idioms and figures of speech as literal thoughts. Many of them have stopped walking with Christ as a result of their inability to comprehend fundamental biblical interpretation principles.

It has hurt me to read about many well-known Christian leaders and celebrities who have admitted to having doubts—many of them even converting to atheism—after reading the Bible and being troubled by what they discovered. The majority of us have been troubled by things we've read in the Bible. But we also knew from experience that the God we worshipped is a good God and would make sure we would find the correct answer if we searched (Prov. 25:2; Jer. 29:13).

Was Lazarus Taking a Long Nap?

We are told of another episode in the earthly life of Jesus Christ, when His close friend Lazarus became ill and ultimately died. Jesus described this as Lazarus "sleeping." However, until He explained the literal meaning of His expression to His own disciples, the Lord's words were unclear to them:

*These things said he: and after that he saith unto them, **Our friend Lazarus sleepeth**; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep. Then said his disciples, Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well. **Howbeit Jesus spake of his death**: but they thought that he had spoken of taking of rest in sleep. **Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead.** (John 11:11-14)*

Even the closest followers of Jesus did not grasp the figurative nature of His words. The Lord had to give them a literal explanation as a result. Jesus used similar terminology in relation to the dead on other occasions as well. Jesus was asked to visit and heal the daughter of one of the Jewish leaders. When they reached the man's residence, they discovered the people in grief because the girl had passed away.

Not one bit discouraged, Jesus attempted to uplift the mourners, but the figurative language He employed only led to ridicule: "*He said unto them, Give place: for the maid is not dead, but sleepeth. And they laughed him to scorn*" (Matt. 9:24). However, this is in no way justified. There are at least 36 instances in the Bible where the word "sleep" is used to describe someone's death. For example, in 2 Chron. 16:13 we read, "*And Asa slept with his fathers, and died in the one and fortieth year of his reign.*" Both the phrase and its literal interpretation are used in this statement about Asa. Better Bible understanding would have enabled the people in the time of our Lord to comprehend what He was saying. Jesus' followers and the servants of the Jewish ruler misunderstood Jesus' expression due to their ignorance of their own Scriptures, which caused the latter group to mock God.

The idea of “sleep” in regard to death continues to be misunderstood by many Christian organizations as well as a number of Judeo-Christian cults. By interpreting this phrase literally, some have rejected the truth that our conscience existence endures long after the death of our physical body (James 2:26; Matt. 17:1-3; 27:50-53; Luke 16:19-31; Heb. 11:5; 2 Pet. 3:18-20; Rev. 6:9-11). A number of needless arguments, disagreements, and splits within the Christian church have resulted from the misinterpretation of this term.

Did Canaan Have Literal Rivers of Milk?

Let’s look at one more example that demonstrates this truth. In the Old Testament, God revealed to Moses His plans for guiding Israel into the Promised Land:

*And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto **a land flowing with milk and honey**; unto the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites. (Exodus 3:8; King James Version)*

If they use common sense, most Bible readers should be aware that the country of the Canaanites, etc. did not actually have rivers of milk and honey running through it. A more recent translation makes it easier to comprehend the concept that God was trying to convey to Moses:

Now I will go down and save my people from the Egyptians. I will take them from that land and lead them to a good land

where they can be free from these troubles.
It is a land filled with many good things.
Many different people live in that land: the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. (Easy to Read Version)

We could give more instances of how God compares Himself to things like rocks, strong towers, feathers, and wings. Most of us are aware that these are symbols of God's power to shield His people from harm rather than actual portrayals of Him. All of them would be in opposition to one another and other biblical descriptions of God if we took them literally.

A Word of Caution

It is vital to issue a word of caution on this topic because humans have a propensity to go to extremes. There are many idioms and figures of speech in the Bible, but this does not imply that *everything* in Scripture is figurative, nor does it give us the right to declare something to be merely "idiomatic" when a literal interpretation of a passage of Scripture conflicts with a favorite concept.

One of the errors made by some church fathers was to "allegorize" the Bible, especially the Old Testament, in an effort to appease both the critics of the day and the prevalent Greek philosophical ideas of the period. The same technique is used to even greater extremes by Progressive and Liberal theologians to refute historical events that are described in Scripture, such as those related to the Garden of Eden, the literal talking serpent, the Noahic deluge, the events in the book of Job, etc. We have observed that individuals can take an idiom or figurative word from the Bible, claim that it is literal, and then use that to construct a false teaching. On the

other hand, some people have taken biblical passages that are literal declarations and historical facts and have interpreted them as figurative or, worse yet, allegorical in order to fit them into their theological narrative.

Avoid both extremes at all costs. Applying solid biblical principles of interpretation to flawed and erroneous ideologies is not a game that should be played with God's Word. The concentration of this book on idiomatic and figurative language in Scripture should not lead the reader to search exhaustively for these elements throughout the entire Bible. This book aims to show readers that, although Scripture contains some idiomatic and figurative language, its literal truth must be found and applied.

Interpreting Scripture with Scripture

Finis Dake, author of the *Dake's Annotated Reference Bible*, has provided what I consider to be the best guidance on these issues. Dake held that the majority of the Bible had to be taken literally. However, He was also aware that, "The Bible contains some figurative language."² He continued by addressing the imbalances that result from leaning too far in one direction or the other, saying that, "Much confusion has been caused by taking as literal what is figurative and taking as figurative what is literal."³ Dake shows how to spot the distinction:

One must be sure the language is figurative before giving it a figurative meaning. If it seems hard to determine by the words of the subject matter, then Scriptures on the same subject will clear up the difficulty. There are always plain literal statements in the Bible proving every doctrine. So if a figurative statement is found in the Bible on the same subject, explain the figurative passage with the literal passages. Remember, no figure of speech ever does away with the literal truth, but merely expresses it in another way. Surely with such an

abundance of literal passages, the few figurative statements on the same subject in Scripture can be understood.⁴

God clearly understood that succeeding generations who were distanced from these civilizations would need to understand His message, even though He chose to do it through the human agency of that time period and employed their idioms and figurative language. As a result, God made sure that the explanations for specific things would be included in other passages of His Word.

As Finis Dake pointed out, it's crucial to search for a passage's literal meaning elsewhere in Scripture when we come across one that is figurative or idiomatic. It is clear that the Scripture we are reading has been misinterpreted if a passage seems to portray God in a negative light or compels us to engage in behavior that is prohibited elsewhere. Because of misinterpretations of the Bible and our own ignorance, the devil has been able to destroy professing Christians.

Our Lord's temptation in the wilderness serves as an example of why Scripture must be used to interpret Scripture:

*Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for **it is written**, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, **It is written again**, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. (Matt. 4:5-7)*

Satan quoted *legitimate* Scripture to Jesus but he quoted it *illegitimately*. A more foolish, ignorant, and arrogant person would have followed Satan's advice, believed it to be supported by Scripture, and committed suicide. However, the Lord resisted Satan's temptation by using the invaluable insight that Scripture must interpret itself. Every "*it is written*" must be understood in the context of an "*it is written again.*"

The Bible serves as both a dictionary and a commentary. There is no better resource for interpreting the Bible than the Bible itself, though we are grateful for the many Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and other Bible aids that are available and we use them frequently. Figurative and idiomatic language are always explained elsewhere in the book's pages; therefore, we would be wise to search for all passages that touch on a particular subject.

Great care should be taken to ensure that idiomatic and metaphorical language is used correctly by contrasting it with literal remarks on the same subject in Scripture. This prevents us from portraying God as an erratic, schizophrenic deity who is neither knowable nor dependable. God is a loving, compassionate, faithful, and good God. Any passage of Scripture that seems to suggest different needs to be carefully analyzed. In the chapters that follow, we'll try to explain several figurative and idiomatic expressions that appear to denigrate God's character in order to reveal the whole truth about Him.

Chapter Three

The Name or Character of God

But let him who glories glory in this: that he understands and knows Me [personally and practically, directly discerning and recognizing My character], that I am the Lord, Who practices loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord. (Jer. 9:24; Amplified Bible)

The idea that God is beyond what His finite creatures can comprehend is held by many individuals. He is perceived by them as being enigmatic and unfathomable. They believe that it's just not possible for creatures as limited as us to understand Him. But God insists that He wants to be recognized and understood in His message to Jeremiah. If God wishes to be known and understood, then both are possible.

The Name-Character of God

Learning certain truths about God is the first step to knowing and understanding Him. God identifies distinct aspects of Himself in Jeremiah that He wants us to be familiar with. He makes it clear that He always does what is right and is loving, compassionate, and fair. Knowing and comprehending God therefore requires understanding His character.

The name of a person typically served as a criterion for character in the ancient Hebrew culture. Moses pleaded with God to reveal His glory (v. 18), and God complied by revealing who He is:

*And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and **I will proclaim the name of the Lord** before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy. (Exodus 33:19)*

“Name” comes from the Hebrew word *shēm*. According to Strong’s dictionary it is, “by implication honor, authority, character.” In his “Expository Dictionary of Bible Words,” Stephen D. Renn explains, “In this expression, the ‘name’ of Yahweh indicates his person and character.”¹

The Scripture itself makes this truth clear. Moses was told by God that He would “proclaim His Name” and immediately spoke of His graciousness and mercy. God continues with this declaration of His Name and then describes certain aspects of Himself:

Exodus 34:5-7

5 And the Lord descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and **proclaimed the name of the Lord.**

6 And the Lord passed by before him, and **proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth,**

7 Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.

In this passage the Lord “proclaimed the name of the Lord” and immediately we are told that He

“proclaimed” that He is “merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.” Most of us Westerners only consider a person’s name as a means of identification. In our society, it’s common for parents to give their newborn children names without considering the names’ meanings.

Most other cultures, particularly those of the Ancient Near East, do not operate in this way. On the basis of biblical authority, we can understand that when God proclaims His Name, He is not only providing us with a unique identification but also revealing to us exactly what kind of God He is. As Bible scholar John R. Dummelow wrote, “God’s name is His revealed character, which now receives due recognition and response from the whole world.”²

God revealed His Name to Moses, and He reveals it to His people today, in order to dispel all the manufactured mysticism about Who He is. God’s Name was made known in Scripture specifically to dispel any misconception of His actual nature:

By the name of God, the posterity of Abraham were wont to understand God himself, especially with respect to his revealed character, and as opposed to the false apprehensions and unauthorized worship of those nations to whom he had not made himself known. Sometimes, it denoted all the divine perfections; and at other times, it had a particular respect to one. To the Name of God this people were accustomed to direct all their faith, love and worship; and to ascribe all their protection, deliverance and salvation; considering this as the same with directing or ascribing these to God himself. To this they used to attribute the miracles wrought in behalf of their fathers.³

Today, that still holds true. It is in our best interest to receive a revelation of His Name, or more specifically,

a comprehension of His actual character, if we are to get rid of the misleading impressions of God that flawed men have given us.

God's Name Idiomatic of His Character

The idea that God's Name is a revelation of His character is also intimated in other passages of Scripture. In Psalm 135:3 we read, "*Praise the Lord; for the Lord is good: sing praises unto his name; for it is pleasant.*" Here again we learn that God's Name is connected to His goodness. In Psalm 109:21 we are told, "*But do thou for me, O God the Lord, for thy name's sake: because thy mercy is good, deliver thou me.*" Here, we observe that God's Name is a revelation of His merciful nature.

These Scriptures demonstrate that God's name is an idiom that describes His nature, personality, and character rather than just a formal identifier by which He is addressed:

The name of God is that by which He is known amongst men. It is more than His honour or reputation, although that is included in it according to Hebrew idiom; it is the expression of His character or His personality. To act for His name's sake, therefore, is to act so that His true character may be more fully revealed, and so that men's thoughts of Him may more truly correspond to that which in Himself He is.⁴

Another writer also explains, "This Name of God, in the idiom of the Old Testament writers, is acknowledged to denote God himself."⁵ One other theologian stated, "For it is very well known to all that are acquainted with the Hebrew Idiom, that by the Name of the Lord, in Scripture, is meant the Lord himself."⁶ Knowing God's Name entails knowing the Lord Himself. God's Name is the most appropriate idiom to start with

since, in this book, we are studying Hebrew idioms and figurative language in order to obtain a deeper grasp of God's loving character. All other idioms we'll be studying are built on this one.

The relevance of comprehending this idiom is practical. Scripture informs us that, "*The name of the LORD is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe*" (Prov. 18:10). The psalmist also wrote, "*For thou art my rock and my fortress; therefore for thy name's sake lead me, and guide me*" (Psalm 31:3). The key to God's protection from illness, disease, and other physical perils is to have a deep awareness of His Name, "*.... I will set him on high, because he hath known my name*" (Psalm 91:14b). Hence, it is crucial that we familiarize ourselves with this particular idiom:

"The Name of the Lord" means his character—his perfections, as revealed in His word;—what any one is, being naturally associated with, and suggested by, his name. When the Psalmist says, "They that know Thy name will put their trust in thee—it is quite obvious, that by knowing Jehovah's name he means more than merely knowing that God was called Jehovah. It is to know God Himself;—the idiom being quite common in the Scriptures of using the name of a person as a phrase for the person to whom the name belongs. The comparison of Jehovah's name to "a strong tower" is frequent. There is in this, occasion for grateful wonder; that to a sinner God's name should be a refuge!"⁷

Every time God's Name is revealed, we come to grasp His desire to take action in the most amazing ways for us (Ex. 3:13-15). The Bible uses words like supplier, healer, victor, peacemaker, shepherd, etc. to describe God (Gen. 22:14; Ex. 15:26; 17:15; Judges 6:23-24; Psalm 23:1).⁸ Mastering this idiom will not only increase our

knowledge of and appreciation for God, but it will also strengthen our faith in His promises and means of provision.

Jesus Reveals God's Character

More evidence that understanding God is possible is due to the fact that the Father sent Jesus to us specifically for that purpose:

And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. (1John 5:20)

How did Jesus impart this knowledge to His disciples so they could better understand the Father? In one of the more thorough records of Jesus's conversations with the Father, He explains this:

I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them me; and they have kept thy word. (John 17:6)

Other translations and paraphrases give us a little more clarity on this passage. **An Understandable Version** renders John 17:6, "*I have revealed your name [i.e., your power and character].*" **The Amplified Bible** reads, "*I have made Your Name known to them and revealed Your character and Your very Self.*" **The Living Waters Translation** says, "*I have demonstrated to them your very character.*" More emphatically, the **Unlocked Dynamic Bible** offers this paraphrase: "*I have taught*

them who you really are and what you are like.” David Davidson clarified this line in his commentary, saying:

Now, by making known the name of God to those who enjoyed the old dispensation, is plainly suggested, that additional light was conveyed to them, which they could not have derived from it. By manifesting God’s name to them, therefore, we must understand the communication of those truths which peculiarly characterise the new dispensation. And as every revelation which God gives tends further to illustrate the Divine character, the instructions which our Lord gave his disciples, relating to life and immortality, and the recovery of sinners through his mediation, may well be called revealing God, or (which in the Hebrew idiom is the same) the name of God.⁹

To *manifest* God’s Name is an idiomatic or figurative way of saying “to unveil His character,” or, to put it another way, to demonstrate to others who God really is. Jesus revealed the name and the character of God, not only via His teachings (John 12:49), but also through His own deeds of unselfish love (John 8:19; 14:7-11; 2 Cor. 4:4; Heb. 1:3).

Additionally, Jesus’ miracles of healing have demonstrated to us what God is like (Acts 10:38). Jesus only carried out what He observed His Father doing (John 5:19; 8:28; 9:4). These healing and deliverance miracles revealed the Father’s compassion and love for a wounded humanity. In addition to being the second person of the Triune Godhead, Jesus is the whole revelation of who God is. Hebrews says that Jesus is, “*the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person*” (Heb. 1:3b). John wrote, “*At the beginning God expressed himself. That personal expression, that word, was with God, and was God*” (John 1:1a; Phillip’s New Testament). As another explained:

God expresses Himself in nature and in men, but the complete expression of His character is in Christ. Christ is the Name of names; He is the Word of God. He that hath seen Him, hath seen the Father. In Him the confusing contradictions of the natural world find their authoritative interpretation. In Him the blurred reflections of the Supreme Being through the imperfections of humanity are brought together in the white light of a perfectly transparent medium. In language there is no such marvel as an absolutely accurate translation of a classic from one tongue to another. The delicate undertones of idiom cannot be snared in exact words and phrases of the new language. Even with circumlocution and commentary they may only be approximated; and then the concise force is altogether lost. Jesus Christ is God's Name perfectly translated from terms of heaven to terms of earth.¹⁰

In John we read, *“No one has ever seen God. The only Son is the one who has shown us what God is like. He is himself God and is very close to the Father”* (John 1:18; Easy to Read Version). As another man wrote, *“Christ is the ultimate revelation of God Himself.”*¹¹ God wants us to understand this portrait of who He is. But in addition to decades of incorrect teaching, our lack of understanding of the idioms and figurative language in Scripture has also clouded this revelation of God's true and loving nature.

Chapter Four

Can a God of Love Hate Sinners?

He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. (1 John 4:8, 16)

Regarding this verse, Henry Forster Burder writes: “Love is represented, not only as a prominent feature in the character of God, but as the very essence of his nature.”¹ When the Bible refers to God as “love,” it is not a description of one of His numerous attributes; rather, it is a revelation of His fundamental character. Every decision God makes, every action He performs, every word He says, every idea He thinks, and every plan He makes all stem from love. God is completely without self-interest. Any other quality that is attributed to God, such as His might, wisdom, knowledge, etc., all flows through and is controlled by His love.

The “Hatred” of God

His love extends to every creature, regardless of their status in life or essential nature. Jesus told Nicodemus, “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son*” (John 3:16a). Those who embrace Calvinism believe that God hates the very people He supposedly predestined to reprobation before He ever created them.² They would like to modify the meaning of “world” to “elect in the world” in order to exclude the so-called reprobates because John 3:16 contradicts their erroneous philosophy.

Nothing in the original language would lend credence to the fallacious Calvinist claim that God makes any exceptions to His love. Calvinists, however, are unpersuaded because they hold that the Bible supports their argument that God deliberately despises a particular group of people:

*I have loved you, saith the Lord. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the Lord: **yet I loved Jacob, And I hated Esau,** and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the dragons of the wilderness. (Malachi 1:2-3)*

Paul, in Romans 9, cites this verse from Malachi when he writes, “*As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but **Esau have I hated***” (Romans 9:13). The most well-known instance of God allegedly expressing hatred for particular people or groups is found in this passage of Scripture, though it is not the only one. As a result, we will start with this verse and then show how the rules for correct Bible interpretation also apply to verses that are similar to it.

Is God *really* love or is He, as some claim, a God who hates some for mysterious purposes within Himself? This problem can be solved quite simply by comparing Scripture to Scripture. Jesus, for instance, said that one requirement for being His disciple is to *hate* one’s parents, spouse, and children:

*If any man come to me, and **hate not** his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26)*

Anyone who is aware of how frequently Jesus preached on love—even going so far as to encourage us to love our enemies—would not interpret these words in the way that the reading in the majority of English translations suggests. Additionally, the same Jesus commanded us to “*Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*” (Matthew 19:19). The word “honour” in The Greek means to “value” and “revere.” Jesus could hardly have taught potential disciples to literally hate their parents in one breath and then to revere them in the next.

Furthermore, Scripture gives this command to husbands: “*Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it*” (Eph. 5:25). Young Christian wives are given a similar admonition: “*That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children*” (Titus 2:4).

Our Lord’s injunction that we hate those whom He previously taught us to love and honor has a different meaning now that we are aware that the Bible does not contradict itself. Thankfully, Matthew helps us comprehend the Lord’s meaning more precisely:

He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. (Matt. 10:37)

The understanding given to us by Matthew’s record of our Lord’s teaching is that Jesus must have first place or no place at all. Luke 14:26 is better translated as “*If anyone comes to Me, and does not have single-minded loyalty to me over*” (Lavender’s New

Testament: A Literal Translation). In other words, “hate” in Luke 14:26 is a Hebrew idiom:

I will here mention a few idioms we are told to “hate” one for another; which, on the same principle, means, not really hating the one mentioned, but preferring another in certain cases; as, in the advance of truth, we must love Christ and truth before our companions and relations, and hate (that is, forsake) father and mother rather than forsake Christ. But when father and mother are for Christ, the rule does not apply.³

This relates to the Lord’s prophecy that His advent will cause family divisions (Matt. 10:34-35; Luke 12:51-53). Many individuals are aware that one of the costs of following Christ is being rejected by relatives who are antagonistic to Christianity. Consequently, to follow Christ required putting Him above family ties.

The Idiom of Hatred

We know that Jesus would never contradict Himself. He gave an explanation of “hate” in terms of how we place a higher value on our devotion to Him in comparison to our family. This also aids in our comprehension of God’s position in regards to Jacob and Esau. Another writer elaborates on this further:

What is the meaning of the word “hate?” We will refer to Webster. “Hate”—second definition—“In Scripture, to love less.” He gives the following example: “come to me and hate not father and mother.” Give Christ the preference. “Jacob” have I preferred to “Esau” would be, and truly is, the meaning. In view of the meaning of the word “hate,” Christ has not contradicted himself. It is further true, that, according to the Hebrew idiom, when there are two things in comparison and one is considered vastly more important than the other,

the less important is spoken of in the language of negation, and the more important is expressed affirmatively.⁴

Malachi 1:2-3 and Romans 9:13 can both be understood in light of Luke 14:26 and Matthew 10:37, which helps us understand that the term “hate” employed in the former verses is idiomatic. Romans 9:13 can be understood as indicative of preference rather than an emotional disposition, according to Philip Pugh’s explanation of how the comparison of Scripture allows us to do so:

The love and hatred are to be taken in the sense of privileged and less privileged. Hence the Saviour says, “If any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” Now why do you not understand Luke xiv. 26, as you do Mal. i. 4? Luke xiv. 26 means, that before a man can become a disciple he must love Christ in preference to any one else, or love his father, mother, etc., less than Christ. Why not give poor Esau the benefit of this merciful construction? This rendering of the word hate is perfectly agreeable to the Hebrew idiom.⁵

William Bruce also came to the conclusion that the notion of God hating Esau is to be viewed from an idiomatic standpoint after considering the same comparisons:

There is another phrase in this chapter, which is more liable to misconception: “Jacob I have loved, but Esau have I hated.” This antipathy may be thought unworthy of God; but it is a Hebrew idiom, and means no more than, have preferred Jacob to Esau.” Our Lord says: “if any man hate not his father and mother, and wife and children, and brethren and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” This appears not only

inhuman but contradictory to the whole tenor of his doctrine. But, in truth, it is exactly parallel to that other text: “he who loveth father or mother more than me,” (more than my service) “is not worthy of me,” is not qualified for my service. Besides, the preference of Jacob was only for a temporal purpose, and no more inconsistent with justice than any other act of Providence, by which a younger son might inherit an estate.⁶

Bruce makes a reference to the significant point that God chose Jacob over Esau for temporary reasons. Jacob had the honor of fulfilling God’s promise to Abraham to become the nation that would benefit the families of the earth by ushering in the Savior of the world (Gen. 12:1-3; 25:23; Mal. 1:4). Given these details, we can infer that God’s “love” for Jacob and His “hate” for Esau were merely His selection of one nation over another for service:

The word “hate” as applied to Esau in the passages compared, must not be taken in the common sense of that term, but only as a Hebrew idiom intensifying choice.⁷

The Jacob and Esau passages have led some to categorize them as *Bible difficulties* because they fail to recognize “hate” as an idiom. Some people are bold and irreverent enough to call them *contradictions*. Only because we are not conversant with Hebrew idioms and figurative language are these Scriptures considered “difficult” or “contradictory.”

One scholar noted, “Some of these difficulties, if they may be called so, arise from the idioms of the languages in which the Scriptures were originally written.”⁸ By making references to places where it is implied (or perhaps mandated) that a man should despise

one of his wives, the author clarifies the nature of Hebrew idiom:

The Jews had a singular way of expressing comparison, as for instance, in the use of the words 'love' and 'hate' for 'prefer' and 'not prefer.' Thus in Deut. xxi. 15 do not express the meaning that we are accustomed to attach to them, but simply that one wife is preferred before, or liked better than the other.⁹

Another academic pointed out that the word "hate" should be defined in the sense of comparison or preference:

.... to some of the more striking Hebrew idioms, which appear of course in the Old Testament, but also in the Hellenistic Greek of the New Comparison, again, is very particularly expressed in Hebrew. To love and to hate is a Hebrew expression for preferring one thing to another.¹⁰

The stigma of having hated Esau as a person or even His descendants as a nation, as we Westerners would define hatred, is removed from God by this viewpoint. God has the right to appoint individuals or nations to particular roles. That in no way lessens His affection for the person who wasn't chosen for the task entrusted to another.

Does God Hate Sinners?

Perhaps this is why we might *prefer* (pun intended) some alternative translations of Romans 9:13. The Living Waters Translation reads, "*And as it is written, 'I chose Jacob instead of Esau.'*" The Hebrew Roots Bible says, "*even as it has been written, 'Jacob I loved, and Esau I have set aside.'*" Both renderings clarify the true intent of the Scripture.

After understanding the Jacob and Esau conundrum, we should be moved to reject the Calvinist philosophy that is so prevalent in the church. The Calvinists are not the only group who reject the idea that “God hates the sin but loves the sinner,” even if the majority of us strongly believe it. Other people also think that God genuinely despises sinners.

Calvinists and others who disagree with this maxim do so because they misinterpret verses like Psalm 5:5 that state, “*The foolish shall not stand in thy sight: thou hatest all workers of iniquity.*” This is just one among several (see also Psalm 11:5; Prov. 6:16-19; Hosea 9:15).¹¹ The problem with building a doctrine that God hates sinners on this sparse selection of Scriptures goes back to how it contrasts with our Lord’s statement, “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son*” (John 3:16a). In addition, we read in Romans:

*For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But **God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.** (Romans 5:6-8)*

Here we are told, in contrast to Psalm 5:5, that God loves sinners. Every person who ever sinned was a “worker of iniquity.” In Ephesians 2 we are reminded of how we were “*dead in trespasses and sins*” (v. 1), “*children of disobedience*” (v. 2) and spent our time “*fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind*” (v. 3). I believe that these are avid descriptions of people who work iniquity. However, this same chapter also informs

us, “*But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us*” (v. 4).

According to the aforementioned, God not only appeared to love horrible sinners, as many of us were before giving our lives to Him, but we are also required to love them in order to mimic Him as His children:

But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil. Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful. (Luke 6:35-36, see also Matt. 5:43-48)

God does not adhere to a “do as I say, not as I do” philosophy. Therefore, we imitate God’s character by treating vile sinners with compassion and kindness. But how do we square this with biblical passages like Psalm 5:5? One guideline is to keep in mind that the Bible serves as both a dictionary and a commentary. It explains its own language and defines its own terminology. Take note of another instance in Scripture where the word “hate” is employed:

*Whereas thou hast been **forsaken and hated**, so that no man went through thee, I will make thee an eternal excellency, a joy of many generations. (Isaiah 60:15)*

“Hate” is used in the sense of *abandonment and rejection*. This is the context in which a number of modern translations render our Lord’s words in Luke 14:26: “*is not willing to (if & when necessary) forsake*” (Alpha and Omega Bible); “*and said, he that can’t*

abandon” (Mace New Testament); *“but will not leave”* (Easy to Read Version); *“are not ready to abandon”* (God’s Word). The “hate” that our Lord spoke about is the willingness to abandon familial relationships for Him. Another rendering of Psalm 5:5 renders it in this manner: *“Neither shall the transgressors continue in your sight: you **cast out**, Jesus, all them that work iniquity”* (Alpha and Omega Bible).

Despite His tremendous love for them, the Lord’s “hatred” of those who work iniquity means that, if necessary, He is willing to abandon them if this is what they desire (1 Sam. 15:22-23; Isa. 59:1-2). Never forget that this alienation from God is brought about by those workers of iniquity themselves (Job 21:14; 22:17; Deut. 28:20; 31:16-18). However, if offenders repent and turn from their evil ways, God is more than happy to make things right with them (Isaiah 55:7-8; Eze. 18:21-23; Eph. 2:11-13; James 4:8-10).

There is no conflict or difficulty in the Scripture when we view the term “hate” in this way. God is not a schizophrenic deity who suddenly changes his feelings from hatred to love. God does indeed hate sin, yet He always loves the sinner. God respects their freedom, nevertheless. God is forced to abandon them if they choose to sin and refuse to turn from their wrongdoing.

Chapter Five

Is God Jealous of His Rivals?

Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me. (Exodus 20:5)

Beyond the comprehension of Hebrew metaphors and idioms, the English translation of this passage paints a picture of a small-minded and vengeful God. Many atheists, like Richard Dawkins, claim that these Bible texts prove that God is “jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak.”¹ Two assertions in the English rendering of Exodus 20:5 unfairly disparage God:

- God as “Jealous”
- God “visiting” iniquity upon His haters and their descendants.

This has a gangster-like ring to it. God will punish you if you defy Him, but He will also punish your family, including great-grandchildren and future generations. This gives the impression of a vindictive person who is emotionally unstable and obsessed with control.

Jealousy (Envy) Is NOT from God

As we shall demonstrate, this common translation, while conforming to the doctrine of certain professing Christian and religious groups, does not adequately convey the character of God. We are aware of people who, motivated by jealousy, killed a former lover or, on rare occasions, even other family members. The majority

of us would concur that someone like that was not just self-centered but also psychotic and fixated on their object of desire. The laws in the USA are designed to protect persons who become the focus of such “jealous” people.

Nevertheless, God refers to Himself as “jealous” throughout the Bible.² The term “jealous” in the West refers to someone who harbors resentment toward someone (typically a rival) due to their success and advantages or suspicions and anxieties of infidelity. Is this the meaning of God’s alleged jealousy?

As we have emphasized throughout this book, Scripture needs to be free to interpret itself. The kind of self-centered jealousy that is typically attributed to fallen mankind is not something that the God of the Bible is. Keep in mind that we are told in 1 John 4:8, “*He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.*” In 1 Cor. 13:4 we read, “*charity envieth not.*” The Greek word for “envieth” according to Strong’s Concordance means, “be jealous over.”³ 1 Corinthians 13:4 is rendered as follows in another translation:

Love endures long and is patient and kind; love never is envious nor boils over with jealousy, is not boastful or vainglorious, does not display itself haughtily. (The Amplified Bible)

Additionally, according to the Williams New Testament, “*love never boils with jealousy.*” As a result, if God is love, He cannot have any qualities that are incompatible with love. On the other hand, anything that contradicts love comes from a satanic source:

If you are selfish and have bitter jealousy in your hearts, then you have no reason to boast. Your boasting is a lie that hides the

truth. That kind of “wisdom” does not come from God. That “wisdom” comes from the world. It is not spiritual. It is from the devil. Where there is jealousy and selfishness, there will be confusion and every kind of evil. (James 3:14-16; Easy-to-Read Version)

James makes it quite clear that “bitter jealousy” is the root of all confusion and evil. God is not the author of confusion or evil (1 Cor. 14:33; 1 John 1:5). As a result, envy has its roots in Satan’s domain, as James reminds us.

Interpreting Scripture with Scripture

Since jealousy is a quality of Satan, we must not impute to our God of love the concepts implied in the common usage of this word. Thankfully, when we let the Bible speak for itself, we discover that there is a “godly jealousy” that is entirely consistent with God’s love:

*For I am jealous over you with **godly jealousy**: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.* (2 Corinthians 11:2)

The “godly jealousy” Paul refers to is quite different from the evil and confusion that is conceived of the devil. Looking at the context, we can see that this godly jealousy is motivated by a protective love and concern for the people to whom he is writing. Paul is cognizant of Satan’s desire to deceive people, corrupt their minds, and destroy them (vv. 3, 4). This “godly jealousy” of Paul is filled with passionate, compassionate, and selfless love rather than being selfish and sinful. Like

a mother hen, it wishes to keep its children safe (Matt. 23:37-38; Ps. 91:3-4).

Other translations render 2 Cor. 11:2 as follows: *“God’s passion is burning inside me for you, because, like a loving father....”* (The Passion Translation); *“I’m deeply concerned about you with the same concern that God has”* (Common English Bible); *“I am as concerned about you as God is”* (Contemporary English Version); *“I love you as God loves you”* (Worldwide English New Testament); *“For I love you by the love of God”* (Wycliffe Bible).

This is exactly how the word “jealous” is used in relation to God in Exodus 20:5 and other places in Scripture. Maxie D. Dunnam elaborates:

The word “Jealousy” comes from the Hebrew word that means ‘to be red in the face.’ And, in the Old Testament, it does not connect with the human emotion that we associate with envy, pettiness, and suspicion. Rather, it means that God cares for us, and therefore is not indifferent to what we do and how we live. Jealous, in this sense, is as much a part of the nature of God as are His love and forgiveness.⁴

When jealousy is understood in this way, the image of a psychotic stalker God who is prepared to kill us because we spurned Him is no longer there. Instead, we have the reality of a loving God who longs to keep us safe. Adam Clarke, a distinguished Wesleyan scholar, describes how God’s jealousy is an expression of His desire for our happiness:

Jealous God - This shows in a most expressive manner the love of God to this people. He felt for them as the most affectionate husband could do for his spouse; and was jealous for their fidelity, because he willed their invariable happiness.⁵

These facts allow us to conclude that God's jealousy and His selfless love are compatible. This is once more evident if we let the Bible serve as a dictionary and define its own terms. Joel 2:18 states, "*Then will the Lord be **jealous** for his land, and **pity** his people.*" The interchangeable use of the words "jealous" and "pity" in this Scripture clarifies what it means for God to be "jealous" in this context.

The following translations of Joel 2:18 provide a clearer expression of this idea: "*Then the Lord became passionate about this land*" (Common English Bible); "*The Lord was deeply concerned about his land*" (Contemporary English Version); "*Then the Lord cared very much about his land. He felt sorry for his people.*" (Easy to Read Version); "*But Yahweh showed that he was concerned about his people and that he would act mercifully toward them*" (Unlocked Dynamic Bible).

Jealousy Used of God Figuratively

Given these details, we must realize that any association of the word "jealousy" with God is primarily figurative and intended to convey His hatred of idolatry:

I need scarcely pause here to explain the expression, "a jealous God." You must be aware, my hearers, that it is a figurative expression, and that God, when He adopts a phraseology like this, as descriptive of Himself, speaks to us in our own language, and condescends thus to address us in order that He may be the better understood by us. Jealousy, in the ordinary acceptance of the term, is a weak and a depraved passion: and it would be utterly impious to ascribe anything like this feeling to the blessed God, who is not subject to the emotions which we feel; whose mind is always calm and unperturbed; who can never harbour an ungenerous suspicion, or be the subject of exasperation and fury: and therefore I pray you to

understand, that this is a figurative expression, used to denote God's fixed and unchangeable abhorrence of all those things which go to tarnish the beauty and mar the perfection of His own worship; and this is all that is intended, when He says, "For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God."⁶

In the West, we're accustomed to devoting time to providing thorough justifications in order to express exact definitions of terms and phrases. This also has drawbacks because we have a propensity to complicate matters excessively and increase misunderstanding. The Hebrews, on the other hand, could employ certain characterizations of God without conflating them with the terminology used to describe imperfect human beings.

The ancients were simple, poetic, and visual. As a result, God spoke to the Ancient Hebrews in descriptive terms that they could understand, using words like "jealous" to help them recognize the critical importance of abstaining from idolatry:

The words, "For I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous God," are to be understood in a figurative sense; we cannot say of God that He is jealous, in the literal sense of the word. It is only because we call a person jealous who is anxious that no one else shall enjoy the same right or privilege as he enjoys, that we imply the term "jealous" figuratively to God, because He does not concede Divine worship and service to any other being. He demands of His worshippers that they serve Him alone and none besides.⁷

As the author points out, God is unwilling to share His right to worship with any other being. If God appears to be selfish and egotistical, rest assured that this is not the case. The issue with idolatry is that it is worship of the one who seeks to kill and destroy us (John 10:10). Paul informed the Corinthian church about this:

What say I then? that the idol is any thing, or that which is offered in sacrifice to idols is any thing? But I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils. Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils.
(1 Cor. 10:19-21)

Paul was not presenting any novel ideas. This was asserted by Moses and other Old Testament writers (Lev. 17:7; Deut. 32:17; 2 Chron. 11:15). Worshiping Satan is worshiping a murderous spirit who despises his followers and wishes to destroy them and their families (John 8:44; Heb. 2:14-15). Take note of how satanic worship necessitates the murder of innocent children:

*And they served their idols: **which were a snare unto them.** Yea, they sacrificed their sons and their daughters unto devils, And **shed innocent blood, even the blood of their sons and of their daughters,** whom they sacrificed unto the idols of Canaan: and the land was polluted with blood*
(Psalm 106:36-38)

The psalmist wrote, “*Yea, they sacrificed their sons and their daughters unto devils*” (Ps. 106:37). At abortion clinics all throughout the world, we still offer our children as sacrifices to devils. These depraved, murderous, and self-serving actions continues to keep people in servitude and takes them out of a position where God could shield them from the enemy’s wrath.

God will never accept the worship of other “gods” for this reason. These so-called “gods” are vile and callous. Their main goal is to hurt other people. God is merely “jealous” in the sense that He longs to shield His people from the catastrophe that He knows would result from offering homage to Satan and demons. Therefore, rather than being a sign of selfishness, God’s “jealousy” is an idiomatic expression of His passionate, devoted love for His people.

However, what about God “Visiting the iniquity” onto the idolaters’ offspring? Isn’t He acting more out of spite than love here? Doesn’t this still paint a picture of the retaliating ex-lover? In the following chapter, we’ll explore this topic in greater detail.

Chapter Six

God “Visiting the Iniquity” on Descendants

Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20:5-6)

We discovered in the last chapter that God’s “jealousy” is merely a figurative expression of His protective, selfless love for His children. The risks of idolatry put us in Satan’s domain, where He has the power to destroy our lives (Eph. 4:26-27; James 4:7-8). That being said, why does God seem to threaten us with punishment not just for ourselves but also for our offspring, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren?

Interpreting Scripture with Scripture

When many people read the word “visit,” they immediately think of the term “punish.” The fact that a number of English translations have likewise presented it in this manner does not help. Many have therefore argued that God is unjust for punishing a man’s descendants for the immoral deeds of the man. If true, this would be a reasonable accusation.

However, a person who learns to interpret Scripture with Scripture, “.... understands that I am the Lord that I am kind and fair” (Jeremiah 9:24; Easy to Read Version). God frequently denounces injustice and those who treat others *unfairly* or *unjustly* throughout the Bible (Leviticus 19:15, 35; Deuteronomy 1:17; 16:19;

24:17; 27:19 Psalm 82:1-2; Proverbs 24:23; 28:21; James 2:9).

God's law prohibits us from harshly punishing children for the transgressions of their parents, and the opposite is also true (Deut. 24:16; 2 Kings 14:6; 2 Chron. 25:4). God does not hold double standards and is not a hypocrite. He puts into practice what He expects of us (Luke 6:35-36). God therefore rebuked Israel when they tried to pin their misery on their forefathers:

*The soul that sinneth, it shall die. **The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.*** (Ezekiel 18:20)

The fact that God does not make children suffer as a result of their parents' wickedness is supported by other verses in the Bible (Eze. 18:2-4; Jer. 31:29-30). Every judgment is made in light of the individual's personal behavior. Scripture makes it plain that those who follow the path of righteousness will be blessed regardless of what their ancestors have done (Ezekiel 18:4, 5, 9, 14, 17).

It follows that if God disapproved of the notion that children atoned for their parents' crimes, then it is obvious that our interpretation of Exodus 20:5-6 is incorrect. Even so, I would assert that we have misconstrued what is actually being taught in the passage. Any "unfavorable" visitation from God, according to His Word, is "... *upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.*" The remark would have to suggest that the "unfavorable visitation" is legitimately directed at that particular generation carrying

on the hatred of God displayed by their ancestors in accordance with God's edict that children must not suffer for the sins of parents. An alternative rendering reads:

*Do not bow down to them or be subservient to them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God. I follow up on the guilt of the fathers with their children, their grandchildren, and their great-grandchildren, **if they also hate me.*** (Exodus 20:5; Evangelical Heritage Version)

God is not some inhumane autocrat who "punishes" His adversaries' ancestors. However, if grandchildren and great-grandchildren continue to follow in their parents' footsteps of hatred and idolatry, they will inevitably experience the same results.

"Visit" Does Not Mean "Punish"

Some may still reasonably ask, "But isn't God 'punishing' those who hate Him still spiteful and vindictive." That would be accurate if Exodus 20:5 was to be interpreted in that way. It would undoubtedly go against the advice given by our Lord, who says:

*But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, **do good to them that hate you**, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; **That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven:** for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matt. 5:44-45)*

When we extend kindness to people who despise us, we emulate our heavenly Father. Therefore, it is unlikely that the belief that God personally harms His enemies when He “visits the iniquity” upon them is the accurate interpretation of the scripture.

It assists us in first understanding the meaning of the word “visit.” The great Hebrew scholar, Dr. Robert Young, defined it as, “To look after, inspect.”¹ Another scholar, Jeff Benner, tells us that it means, “To meet with another for the purpose of assisting, inspecting or oversee.”² One more expert in the language, Julius Bates, explains that it is, “... to inspect or visit the people, related as well to their conduct, religious or civil.”³

The term “visit” appears in Scripture both favorably and unfavorably. Examining the many texts suggests that God is keeping an eye on someone to determine if He may bless them or if He must leave them to bear the consequences of their defiance. God, for instance, said to King Asa:

For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him. Herein thou hast done foolishly: therefore from henceforth thou shalt have wars. (2 Chron. 16:9)

God never observes people to do them harm but always to do them good (Gen. 1:21; 50:24-25; Ex. 3:16; 4:31; 13:19; Ruth 1:6; 1 Sam. 2:21; Psalm 65:9). God was trying to find a way to favor Asa. But because Asa preferred to follow pagan kings over God, God was forced to let Asa endure a life of perpetual conflict rather than peace (2 Chron. 16:7-8; Psalm 81:9-16). In a similar

way, it is claimed that the Israelites missed their visitation at the time that Jesus was on earth:

Luke 19:42-44

42 Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, **the things which belong unto thy peace!** but now they are hid from thine eyes.

43 For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side,

44 And shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; **because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation.**

Another translation of verse 44 says, “*That will happen because you did not know the time when **God was ready to help you***” (Luke 19:44b; Worldwide English Translation). Part of God’s visitation to earth through Jesus was to aid and bless Israel (Luke 1:68, 78). However, they persisted in rejecting their own Messiah, which kept God from bestowing the desired blessing on them.

Even though the word “visitation” is frequently used to connote something bad, this understanding of God’s intentions is quite constrained. It must be understood as a Hebrew idiomatic expression. The late theologian, George Bush, explained that, “... in the scripture idiom God is said to ‘visit’ both when he executes his purposes of judgment and of mercy.”⁴

Other academics have emphasized that while God’s visitation is *figurative*, it is not always a

punishment. His visit has both a *favorable* and *unfavorable* side:

To visit, in Scripture phraseology, is a figurative expression, used in both a good and a bad sense; and in each sense with a variety of shades of meaning. When used in a good sense, it signifies to remember to visit in mercy, or to bestow some distinguished favour upon one who has been apparently neglected and forgotten And when used in a bad sense, its general import is to inquire into, to make an inquisition for, or to inflict punishment.⁵

Now Visiting is a figurative expression: And in the general, God is said to visit, when after a long space of time, in which he seemed to have forgotten, or taken no notice of Men, he declares by his Providence that he hath still observed their ways and doings. And this word of Visiting may be taken either in a good, or in an evil part.⁶

God wants to bless everyone because he loves them all. However, if God “visits” (looks after, inspects) a person or group of people and discovers they have no interest in having any interactions with Him, then the visitation, which God always intends as a blessing, becomes a harsh judgment.

God’s Policy of Non-Interference

Exodus 20:5 is to be understood in this light. If we recognize that “hate” can also mean “reject,” we can see how God “visiting the iniquity” on idolators and their descendants in Exodus 20:5 fits within the realm of missed blessings.

The New English Translation renders the latter part of Exodus 20:5 as follows: “.... *responding to the transgression of fathers by dealing with children to the third and fourth generations of those who reject me.*”

When we reject God, we push Him away and tell Him that we don't need Him (1 Sam. 8:7; 10:19). To reject God is to reject everything He wants to do for us in terms of blessing and protection. God has no choice but to reciprocate because He values our liberty (1 Sam. 15:23, 26; Hos. 4:6). Again, God told Asa:

He met Asa and told him, "Listen to me, Asa and all Judah and Benjamin! The Lord is with you when you are loyal to him. If you seek him, he will respond to you, but if you reject him, he will reject you. (2 Chronicles 15:2; New English Translation)

God's rejection means that God can no longer help and bless. While He will not be the cause of our problems, He will permit the repercussions of our disobedience to be felt: "*So Yahweh rejected all the people of Israel and of Judah. He punished them by allowing the armies of other nations to defeat them*" (2 Kings 17:20a; Unlocked Dynamic Bible).

When it is asserted that God will "visit the iniquity" upon parents and their offspring, this principle of "non-interference" is being taught. As Jeremiah stated:

*You show loyal love and endless mercy to thousands. But **You also allow the damaging effects of the parents' sins to fall into the laps of their children.** You are the great and powerful God; the Eternal, Commander of heavenly armies, is Your solemn name. (Jer. 32:18; The VOICE Translation)*

The Unlocked Dynamic Bible says, "*but people suffer the consequences of the sins that their parents have*

committed.” Therefore, as some academics have emphasized, God “visiting the iniquity” must not be read in the sense that God physically damages those who despise or reject Him, but rather that our rejection of Him prevents Him from acting in order to mitigate the repercussions of such behavior:

God visits the sins of the fathers upon the children by permitting those sins to be followed by their natural consequences. He governs the world by a system of given laws, the violation of which is attended with corresponding penalties. And the infliction of these penalties may, in a remote manner, affect the offspring of guilty parties; but there is no injustice Thus parents, after having greatly injured their constitutions by drunkenness, profligacy, &c., transmit to their offspring a weak and sickly system both of body and mind, with which the latter are afflicted through life. To prevent this being the case, would require a miraculous interference on the part of God. And as he does not interfere to prevent it, he may be said, in this sense, to visit the parents’ sins upon their children.⁷

As the offences of sinners bring evil on their posterity, as God permits it to be so, and it is not to be expected that he will interpose to prevent it, in this sense, God might be said to visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children: and in this sense, he continues to do it.⁸

Even those who detest and reject God are loved by Him. He will make every effort to reach people, but He will always respect their right to make their own decisions (Deut. 30:15, 19; Isa. 1:18-20). The phrase “visit the iniquity” refers to God *allowing*—rather than *causing*—the results of wicked decisions.

Chapter Seven

Does God Want Us to be Afraid of Him?

Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God, and serve him, and shalt swear by his name. (Deuteronomy 6:13)

Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God; him shalt thou serve, and to him shalt thou cleave, and swear by his name. (Deuteronomy 10:20)

It will be easier to understand some of the Bible's vocabulary in reference to God if you are cognizant of the fact that it frequently employs figurative and idiomatic language. This is unquestionably true in regards to concepts such as "the fear of the Lord."

Some people assume that "the fear of God" means viewing Him as a tyrant rather than a loving Father. This is a result of an incorrect perception of God's nature. S. D. Gordon, one of my favorite classic authors, observed:

Some of us shrink back from making a full surrender of life to God. And if the real reason were known it would be found to be that we are afraid of God. We fear He will put something bitter in the cup, or some rough thing in the road. And without doubt the reason we are afraid of God is because we do not know God. The great prayer of Jesus' heart that night with the eleven was, "that they may know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou didst send." To understand God's will we must understand something of His character, Himself.¹

The phrase "fear of the Lord" must be understood in the context of a loving Heavenly Father as exemplified

by our Lord Jesus Christ's life. A loving God should be *feared*, but no one should *dread* Him. Let us learn the distinction.

Never Be Afraid of God

While knowledge of the original Bible languages is important, this is not always helpful without also being familiar with the idioms and figurative language used by the people in the Bible. Every Bible dictionary tells us, for example, that the Hebrew word for "fear" means to be *frightened, afraid, terrified, and dread*.

However, according to these Bible dictionaries, the same word also means to *reverence, be in awe of, honor, and respect*. Clearly, the Hebrews used the word "fear" in two different contexts. In the English language we have what we call "homonyms." This refers to two words that share the same spelling and pronunciation but have two distinct meanings.

When most English speakers hear the word "bat," what comes to mind? Do they envision a baseball game or a flying creature? What about the word "right?" Are we talking about something being correct, moving in the opposite direction of the left, or a conservative political affiliation? The list of examples is endless. The context of a sentence is the best way to determine the proper definition of such words.

The term "fear" could not be used to describe the Lord in the sense of being terrified, frightened, or dreadful. According to the Bible, God can only be pleased through faith (Heb. 11:6). But the antithesis of confidence in God is the kind of fear that makes one horrified and worried (Matt. 8:26; Mark 4:40). This type of terror will result in eternal damnation for the individual (Rev. 21:8).

This fear does not originate with God. Paul wrote, "*For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of*

power, and of love, and of a sound mind” (2 Tim. 1:7). Again, Paul tells us:

For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. (Romans 8:15)

The dreadful and terrifying spirit of fear is *enslaving* and is opposite to what the Holy Spirit performs in us. This terror that holds us captive comes from Satan (Heb. 2:14-15). The devil’s lies have caused this terror. God, on the other hand, does not desire for His children to feel terrified of Him. He desires that we approach Him fearlessly:

Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb. 4:16)

The apostle also told us that we are to have “*boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus*” (Heb. 10:19). Thayer’s Greek Definitions defines the words “boldly” and “boldness” as “free and fearless confidence.” As a result, God does not want His children to be afraid of Him. In fact, according to Scripture, people who are terrified of God have not yet reached the heights of love perfection:

Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath

torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. (1 John 4:17-18)

Adam and God enjoyed a lovely, loving relationship before Adam sinned (Gen. 2:19-20). Accepting Satan's falsehoods, which cast doubt on the veracity of God's love and His willingness to provide for us, leads to being afraid of God (Gen. 3:1-7). The "fear of the Lord" is not like this kind of dread:

We see, then, that the fear of the Lord is not being afraid of God, but being afraid of sin and departing from it. There is nothing hurtful or repulsive about God to make us afraid of him. He is a holy, righteous, loving Being. "God is love," and you know love attracts or draws our hearts to the person who manifests love to us. God has manifested his love to us in doing us good. He constantly takes care of us, and all the comforts and blessings we enjoy are bestowed by him.²

Usually, we despise things that frighten us. We fear them because we think they will hurt us in some way, thus we are afraid of them. God doesn't want us to be terrified of Him. True love, which respects one's neighbor, is incompatible with this (Rom. 13:10; Heb. 7:26; Luke 11:9-13). He desires for us to become close to and intimate with Him.

A Godly Fear

In the opening passages Moses tells the people, "*Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God, and serve him*" (Deut. 6:13). Many years later, Zacharias received the following prophecy from the Holy Spirit regarding Jesus:

That he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, In holiness

*and righteousness before him, all the days
of our life. (Luke 1:74-75)*

We are instructed to serve the Lord with fear in one area, and without fear in another. We can be sure that the “fear of the Lord” mentioned in Deuteronomy is not one in which we are to be scared of God since we know that the Bible never contradicts itself. Therefore, the “fear of the Lord” is related to *reverence, awe, honor, and respect.*

When chastising the people for demanding a king, the prophet Samuel made a clear distinction between the two types of fears. In 1 Samuel 12:17-18, Samuel asked God to send thunder and rain to demonstrate to the people how heinous their sin was. God granted Samuel’s request, causing the people to be afraid of both God and Samuel. They asked Samuel to pray for them because they were afraid, and Samuel encouraged them:

*And Samuel said unto the people, **Fear not**: ye have done all this wickedness: yet turn not aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart Only **fear the LORD**, and serve him in truth with all your heart: for consider how great things he hath done for you. (1 Samuel 12:20, 24)*

Samuel used the word “fear” twice. In the first instance Samuel told them *not to fear* or to be afraid of the Lord but to serve Him with all of their heart. In the second instance Samuel told the people to *fear the Lord and serve Him*. Therefore, it is obvious that the second instance of fear is being used in a figurative or idiomatic sense as pertaining to *reverence.*

In chapter five, we discovered that there is something known as “godly jealousy” (2 Cor. 11:2), which is very distinct from the violent, wicked, and jealousy of fallen mankind. There is also a “godly fear” that is very different from the “cowardly fear” brought on by sin:

*Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with **reverence and godly fear*** (Hebrews 12:28)

This “godly fear,” according to the apostle, is *reverence*. It is the same “fear” that is used in reference to our Lord, who is said to have prayed and wept before the Father immediately before going to the cross, “*and was heard in that he feared*” (Hebrews 5:7a).

We know that Jesus was never afraid of His Father but loved Him and they shared a loving, intimate relationship. Hence, another way to render Hebrews 5:7a would be “*he was heard for his **godly fear***” (Revised Standard Version) or “*he was heard because of his reverence*” (Christian Standard Bible).

The “Fear of the Lord” is Worship

Another translation of Hebrews 5:7 that I find helpful is as follows:

*For during His human life He offered up prayers and entreaties, crying aloud with tears to Him who was always able to save Him out of death, and **because of His beautiful spirit of worship** His prayer was heard.* (Hebrews 5:7; Williams New Testament)

The Contemporary English Version reads, “***He truly worshiped God, and God listened to his prayers.***” When used in reference to God, the word “fear” means to *worship Him* rather than to be scared of Him.

Again, in our opening passages we are told to “***fear the LORD thy God, and serve him***” (Deut. 6:13) and “***fear the LORD thy God; him shalt thou serve***” (Deut. 10:20). When Satan tempted His own Creator to worship him (Matthew 4:9; Col. 1:16-17; John 1:1-3), Jesus responded with the following rendering of Deuteronomy’s commands:

*Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt **worship the Lord thy God**, and him only shalt thou serve.* (Matt. 4:10; see also Luke 4:8)

Jesus said to “worship the Lord,” as opposed to Deuteronomy’s “fear the Lord.” In Deuteronomy and other relevant Scripture, Our Lord revealed to us the actual meaning of the term “fear.” The phrase “fear of the Lord” was an idiom used to communicate the imperative of giving God sincere devotion, not to suggest that one should be scared of Him, as Our Lord reveals to us:

‘Tis true, there is an Alteration in the Phrase of the two Texts: In Deuteronomy it runs thus, ‘Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God;’ and in Matthew, ‘Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God;’ which intimates to us plainly, that Christ did not confine himself to the bare Words of Scripture, but gives an Exposition agreeable to the sense of it, which may convince us, that we ought not to be ty’d so strictly to the Words, as to the Meaning of the sacred Writings; since otherwise all our Sermons and Commentaries, and even Translations, might be condemn’d as idle

Additions to the inspir'd Volume, and nothing but the pure native Hebrew and Greek should be receiv'd as containing the Mind of God; and so all those, who are ignorant of the Idiom, the Force, and Beauty of these Languages; must be contented to be also ignorant of his blessed Will; and of what use then, are our Bibles? But this by the way. Christ having thus, in his repulsing the Devil, cited the true Sense of a Scripture Passage, and surely we must allow him to be a proper Judge.³

Our Lord was not giving us a novel interpretation of the phrase. In several other places in Scripture, the meaning of “fearing God” is explained as worship (2 Kings 17:36; Psalm 5:7; 96:9; Rev. 14:7; 15:4). The Bible itself is the best Bible dictionary, as we can see. It defines and explains its own terminology and language. Let us prostrate ourselves before this wonderful God and worship Him as He deserves. We have nothing to fear from Him because He loves us and longs for us to be in His presence.

Chapter Eight

Does God Need Anger Management Classes?

For in my jealousy and in the fire of my wrath have I spoken, Surely in that day there shall be a great shaking in the land of Israel. (Ezekiel 38:19)

God is described as both jealous and wrathful in this passage. Few Christians would have difficulty seeing God's jealousy as merely idiomatic or figurative. But when it comes to God's wrath, the same cannot be said. The majority of people think that all references in the Bible to God being angry, wrathful, or furious must be taken literally. But interpreting guidelines must be followed consistently or not at all.

The Sinfulness of Uncontrolled Wrath

There is a "righteous anger" that God approves, just as there is a "godly jealousy" that is not wicked. Jesus undoubtedly became furious when he observed theft occurring in the temple (Mark 11:15-17; John 2:13-16). But in context, His rage was motivated by His compassion for people who were suffering (Matt. 21:12-14). Therefore, His indignation was a *righteous* one.

Once more, our Lord was correct to be enraged at the Pharisees' heartlessness since they were more focused on upholding man-made laws than on people's suffering (Luke 13:15). But His rage was accompanied by *grief* (Mark. 3:5). Even for the targets of His anger, Jesus' grief showed His compassion (Judges 10:16; Luke 19:40-44).

Because Jesus is the second member of the Trinity, He is God (John 1:1-3, 14; Phil. 2:6). Furthermore, Jesus embodies everything that the Father is (John 14:7-11; 12:45; Col. 1:15; 2 Cor. 4:4; Heb. 1:3).

Jesus never took any action that He did not witness His Father take (John 5:19, 30). As a result, every emotional reaction of Jesus, including anger and grief, were therefore shared by the Father.

Greek philosophy was incorporated into Christianity by some early Christian theologians. They spread the myth that God was “impassible”—that he had no feelings, emotions, or passions. Such things were thought to be beneath God. As a result, they considered any reference to God expressing anger, grief, hurt, or repentance (change of heart) to be mere *anthropomorphisms* (ascribing to God the characteristics only possessed by humans).

Given that the Bible claims that God created man in his image (Gen. 1:26-28; 5:1), it makes sense that man has emotions only because God does. The distinction is that when man fell, his emotions became corrupt. Most sins are typically the result of one’s inability to control their emotions, especially their anger (Prov. 14:29; 16:32). Jesus compared irrational rage to murder (Matt. 5:21-22). Paul claimed that sinful anger fosters Satan’s influence (Eph. 4:26-27).

It is for these reasons the psalmist wrote, “*Cease from anger, and forsake wrath: fret not thyself in any wise to do evil*” (Psalm 37:8). The word for evil in this passage means to do harm, hurt or injury to someone. The type of anger that would bring harm to another is not a *righteous* anger: “*For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God*” (James 1:20). If we are to be like Christ then we must learn to “put away” all anger:

Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for

Christ's sake hath forgiven you. (Eph. 4:31-32)

Since God can genuinely become angry, having God's true character does not mean that we will never become angry; rather, it means that we will be able to control our anger, let it go, and forgive those who have offended us. God wants us to follow His example because this is who He is (Matt. 5:43-48; 6:35-36).

Wrath is the Loss of God's Protection

God is a very emotional being. He is not the God of the stoics. He is passionate. However, God is holy and is not subject to *sinful* passions. He controls His emotions and does not let them go amok. Unlike fallen men, God's emotions never result in sinful and harmful behavior. Does God *literally* get angry? He most emphatically does. Does God lose His temper? Never!

Is this to say that every statement in Scripture in which God expresses anger, wrath, fury, and so on must be taken literally? Whether a verse refers to God as furious or wrathful in a literal sense or as a figure of speech depends on the context. Men who insist on either strict figurative interpretations or pure literalism are being negligent in their study of God's Word.

The Bible frequently describes God's wrath in the sense that He seemingly loses His temper and threatens to personally harm the objects of His wrath. In fact, God expresses a desire to personally *destroy* mankind in His fury (Deut. 6:15; 7:4; 9:8, 19; 2 Chron. 12:7, 12; Psalm 78:38; 106:23; Isa. 13:9; Rev. 11:18). The passage in which God refers to "*the fire of my wrath*" that we read at the beginning of this chapter is just one of many.

None of this resembles the loving God who proclaimed that by showing kindness to those who are cruel toward us that "*ye shall be the children of the*

Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil” (Luke 6:35b). We are told that not retaliating against those who would harm us is imitating Him (1 Pete. 2:21-23; Matt. 5:44-45). It follows that we should allow for a different interpretation than a literal one when we read about God having *destructive wrath*. Thankfully, Hosea helps us make sense of these biblical verses in light of God’s love:

Hosea 11:8-9

8 How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together.

9 I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim: for I am God, and not man; the Holy One in the midst of thee: and I will not enter into the city.

In verse 9 God talks about executing the fierceness of His wrath, which execution would bring about the destruction of Ephraim (an Israelite tribe). Verse 8 on the other hand describes in detail how God would execute His wrath. By “delivering Israel,” he would achieve this. Consequently, God would abandon Israel and turn them over to their enemies.

Basically, Israel would no longer be under God’s protection. Another translation says, “*I don’t want to give you up. Israel, I want to protect you*” (Easy-to-Read Version). God does not want to give them up. He actually desires to keep them safe. Therefore, God’s “wrath” was figurative of no longer being under His protection and being vulnerable to attack from hostile forces. But why does God permit this to happen if He is so hesitant to

exact this “wrath” on the people? In Deut. 31:16, God tells Moses that eventually Israel “.... will forsake me, and break my covenant which I have made with them.” Sadly, when people turn away from God, He is eventually forced to withdraw His shielding presence:

*Then my anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide my face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall befall them; so that they will say in that day, **Are not these evils come upon us, because our God is not among us?*** (Deut. 31:17)

The “anger” or “wrath” of God is the absence of His presence. When God is no longer with them then they will suffer numerous things. Another translation says, “*I won’t protect them, and they’ll be eaten alive*” (The VOICE). Remember that it is the people, not God, who initiate this. Those who chose to push God away are said to incur God’s wrath only in this sense:

*Therefore they say unto God, **Depart from us**; for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways. What is the Almighty, that we should serve him? and what profit should we have, if we pray unto him? His eyes shall see his destruction, and he shall drink of **the wrath of the Almighty.*** (Job 21:14, 15, 20)

God’s wrath and the destruction that follows do not result from God acting vindictively against the people. It is not God losing His cool and personally wreaking havoc on those who despise Him. God is only fulfilling

the people's desires. Since they don't want Him, He eventually gives in to their demands. Sadly, rejecting God has repercussions.

Wrath is Figurative of God's Permission

This is how a verse like Ezekiel 38:19, which we used to open this chapter, must be interpreted. God tells Ezekiel, "... *in the fire of my wrath have I spoken.*" Elsewhere, Ezekiel explains that the "fire of God's wrath" must be understood in the permissive sense:

*And I will pour out mine indignation upon thee, I will blow against thee in **the fire of my wrath**, and **deliver thee** into the hand of brutish men, and skilful to destroy.*
(Ezekiel 21:31)

The Hebrew word for "delivered" is "*nathan*". According to **Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries** it means "permit, give over, be permitted". The Unlocked Dynamic Bible reads, "*I will **allow** brutal men to capture them, men who are experts at killing people.*"

In this permission God is not vindictive. He told Israel concerning Judah, "*because the LORD God of your fathers was wroth with Judah, he hath **delivered them** into your hand*" (2 Chron. 28:9b). Yet He chastises them for their cruelty. As another translation says:

*"The Lord, the God your ancestors worshiped, **let you defeat the people of Judah** because he was angry with them. But now he is angry with you, because **he has seen how cruel you were** in killing them. (Easy-to-Read Version)*

One writer explained, “... in a figurative Way such Things are often ascrib’d to GOD which he neither willed nor effected, but only suffered to be done when he could by his infinite Power have hinder’d them.”¹ Since Scripture affirms that “the fire of my wrath” is used in a permissive sense, then Ezekiel 38:19 is figurative:

These and many similar expressions are evidently figurative; and as they mark the excess of anger, which Scripture, all acknowledge, clearly forbids, they plainly prove that though anger is ascribed to the Divine Mind, it by no means follows that anger in man is not a sin. The terms are simply adapted to the common ways of thinking and acting amongst men, and prove nothing in support of the argument for upholding anger as a lawful feeling.²

As we will learn in a later chapter, a frequent idiom or figure of speech in Scripture is that God is said to do that which He only permitted. The prophet Nahum gave a similar prophecy in which he alluded to God being “jealous” and “furious” which also assists us in understanding that God’s wrath, in such cases, is figurative of His permission:

*God is jealous, and the Lord revengeth; the Lord revengeth, **and is furious**; the Lord will take vengeance on his adversaries, and **he reserveth wrath for his enemies**. **The Lord is slow to anger**, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked: the Lord hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. (Nah. 1:2-3)*

We are told here that God “*he reserveth wrath for his enemies.*” Remember this is the same God who told

us, “*But love ye your enemies, and do good and ye shall be the children of the Highest*” (Luke 6:35). Furthermore, we are told that God is *furiosus*. The word *furiosus* usually means that one is full of rage, violent, wild, and unrestrained. Scripture tells us that such behavior is a sin: “*An angry man stirreth up strife, and a furious man aboundeth in transgression*” (Prov. 29:22).

Yet, God is “slow to anger.” This is indicative of God’s immense patience, mercy, graciousness, kindness and forgiveness (Neh. 9:17; Psalm 103:8-13; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2). Therefore, God’s jealousy, fury and wrath in Nahum 1:2 must be understood figuratively:

“God is jealous ... and is furious.” Lit. “God is flushed with anger (or jealousy for His honour), and is lord of heat (or dispenser of the cup of blind headstrong passion, by which men rush hotly to their “ruin).” Both expressions are, of course, highly figurative. They labour to depict in intelligible language the solemn truth, that our God is a “jealous God” (Exod. xx. 5.), -not apathetic and indifferent when mankind, whom He loves, forsake Him: and also that when men do forsake Him, He often punishes them by leaving them to be taught by experience what are the wages of a headstrong continuance in evil-doing: Whom God is purposing to destroy, He first deprives of common-sense, said the old heathen adage,-an observation which is confirmed before our eyes every day.³

Other places in Scripture connects God’s fury to the loss of His protection in which He permits those that He is furious with to have their way (Isaiah 34:2; Jeremiah 21:5-7, 10; 25:15, 17, 31; 32:31, 36; 33:5). Therefore, God’s wrath, anger, and fury, when used in the sense of bringing harm to others is never to be taken in a literal sense. It is only figurative of His being said to do that which He merely permits to be done.

Figurative of Satanic Activity

In other instances, satanic activity is combined with references to God's "wrath" or "anger." Note the following comparisons:

*And again **the anger of the LORD** was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah (2 Sam. 24:1)*

*And **Satan** stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel (1 Chron. 21:1).*

The identical occurrence is described in both texts in two distinct ways. One of them employs the phrase "anger of God," while in the later account, Satan is used in place of God's wrath. Consequently, 1 Sam. 24:1 must be taken figuratively:

As nothing can happen without the allowance of Jehovah, He is frequently represented, in Scripture, as doing, or causing to be done, what is actually evil; this, of course, is only a method of speech, for, "God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man," (i.e., to evil). Another instance of the same kind of thing is found in this same verse, "And again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel." The Hebrew writers believed that all national calamities were the result of God's displeasure, and, consequently, frequently attribute the untoward events whence such disasters spring to the anger of the Lord. So it is in the text. -God is represented as angry with the Hebrews, (without any assigned cause), and as actually tempting David to a heinous fault, so as to afford Him a pretext for punishing His people, and so appeasing His wrath! Of course, such a view of Jehovah's dealings with the Israelites, or with any nation, or

individual, is altogether unworthy, lowering, and false; and, consequently, such modes of expression as those in the text must be understood in the figurative sense which we have given them Some take “Satan” literally, since he certainly is the author of many, (in the estimation of the Hebrews of all), temptations.⁴

Now note how Paul describes the redeeming act of Christ by using the phrase “wrath to come”; then contrast it with another remark he made:

*And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which **delivered us from the wrath to come.*** (1 Thess. 1:10)

*Who hath **delivered us from the power of darkness,** and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins* (Col. 1:13-14)

We know that the “power of darkness” refers to Satan. Jesus commissioned Paul to, “*turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God*” (Acts 26:18a). In both passages we see that Jesus delivered (rescued) us. One says “wrath to come” and the other says “power of darkness.” Jesus did not come to rescue us from Father-God since He is the One who sent Jesus in the first place (John 3:16-17). We were rescued from Satan’s bondage over us (Heb. 2:14-15; 1 John 3:8), which is also described as “wrath.” Therefore, God’s “wrath” is often a figurative expression.

Chapter Nine

Can God be Tempted and Provoked?

Yet they tempted and provoked the most high God, and kept not his testimonies For they provoked him to anger with their high places, and moved him to jealousy with their graven images. (Psalm 78:56, 58)

The Bible frequently mentions instances where God is said to be *provoked* to anger or jealousy. He is allegedly *tempted* in other Scripture passages. Additionally, God is described as being both *tempted* and *provoked* in Scripture, including our opening passage.¹

Many of us are tolerant people. The majority of us, however, also have “triggers,” “wrong buttons,” or “final straws” that can make us lose all restraint, lose our temper, and unleash a torrent of rage. To put it another way, most of God’s creatures have a threshold for their ability to be patient, and there is a point at which we risk “snapping” and losing control.

Love is Not Provoked – At All

This is the idea or picture that comes into our minds when we think of the word “provoke.” In the English language, this word means to aggravate, enrage, infuriate, and incite a person to anger. As many of us would say, to “provoke” means, “to get on my last nerve.” Can this be true of God as well?

In most Scriptures that deal with God’s wrath, the Hebrew words translated as “provoke,” as we will discover shortly, should never have been rendered in the English language in this manner. But let’s start with what the Bible teaches about God’s nature. 1 John 4:8 declares,

“He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.”
Paul outlines the characteristics of love in 1 Corinthians:

Love suffers long, and is kind; love envies not; love vaunts not itself, is not puffed up, Does not behave itself rudely, seeks not her own, is not easily provoked, keeps no record of evil; (1 Cor. 13:4-5; King James 2000)

Paul’s explanation of love may convince some people that the matter is resolved: “That settles it. God is love and He can be provoked. But He is not *easily* provoked.” The reader would find it interesting to know that the translators inserted the word “easily” into the text, but it is not in the original language. Greek linguists claim that the word is not necessary and should not be included. Marvin Vincent writes, “Easily is superfluous, and gives a wrong coloring to the statement, which is absolute: is not provoked or exasperated.”² E. W. Bullinger adds, “There is no word for ‘easily’. The statement is absolute.”³ Adam Clarke further explains:

Ου παροξυνεται: Is not provoked, is not irritated, is not made sour or bitter. How the word easily got into our translation it is hard to say; but, however it got in, it is utterly improper, and has nothing in the original to countenance it. By the transcript from my old MS., which certainly contains the first translation ever made in English, we find that the word did not exist there, the conscientious translator rendering it thus: - *It is not stitrid to wrath.*⁴

A literal translation of 1 Cor. 13:5 says that love, “*is not provoked, does not impute evil*” (Literal Standard Version) and “*is not provoked, doth not impute evil*” (Young’s Literal Translation). Bullinger renders it, “*is not*

roused to anger, reckons not the contempt done to it" (Bullinger's Companion Bible). God cannot be provoked because God is love, and love cannot be provoked.

Furthermore, Psalm 78:58 says that these rebels, "*moved him to jealousy.*" We already learned in 1 Cor. 13:4 that "*love envies not*" or, "*love never boils with jealousy*" (Williams New Testament). God is undoubtedly not a stoic, dispassionate deity. He is undeniably passionate and capable of feeling real anger, among other things. But every occurrence of "wrath" or "anger" attributed to God in Scripture is not meant to be regarded literally, as we have learned. With regard to jealousy, this is particularly true.

The psalmist adds, "*they tempted and provoked the most high God.*" In this context, "provoke" and "tempt" are used interchangeably. James explains:

*Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for **God cannot be tempted** with evil, neither tempteth he any man (James 1:13)*

The phrase, "cannot be tempted with evil" in the Greek is a verbal compound adjective which A. T. Robertson translates as "untemptable."⁵ Therefore, if God is "untemptable" then He is "unprovocable." Hence, the language in Psalm 78 is figurative:

Tempting of God, is oftentimes the same with provoking him And therefore we find them put together, Ps. xcvi. 8, As in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness. And, therefore, look how God may be said to be provoked, so he may be said to be tempted: that is, both in condescension to our capacities, and in reference to the effects of it: for, as a man, that is provoked, is tempted to take revenge upon him, that hath done him the injury; so God expresseth

himself as provoked by our sins, and tempted thereby to inflict wrath and vengeance upon us for them. But this is only figuratively. As for any proper temptation, by any new motion or inclination wrought in the Divine Will by the presence of any new object, so God cannot without blasphemy be said to be tempted.⁶

According to Scripture, God is “slow to anger” (Neh. 9:17; Ps. 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2; Nah. 1:3) and is “longsuffering” (Ex. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Rom. 2:4; 9:22; 2 Pet. 3:9, 15). Likewise, God is very forgiving and cannot be *provoked* to the point where He “loses His cool.”

“Provoked” is the Wrong Word

Further investigation reveals that the Hebrew word translated as “provoke” in Psalm 78:56 is *mârâh*. The word is presented in the Brown-Driver-Briggs’ Hebrew Definitions as, “to be contentious, be rebellious, be refractory, be disobedient towards, be rebellious against, to show rebelliousness, show disobedience, disobey.”

This word is translated as “provoke” or “provoking” only six times in Scripture. Yet it is translated as “disobedient” twice and as “rebel,” “rebelled,” or “rebellious” thirty-one times in Scripture.⁷ Translation of the word in the sense that the action is on the part of the people is more consistent with the qualities of God’s love that cannot be provoked.

The Christian Standard Bible renders Psalm 78:56 as, “*But they rebelliously tested the Most High God, for they did not keep his decrees.*” An even more literal translation reads, “*Yet they challenged and defied the Most High God and did not keep his solemn commands*” (Unlocked Literal Bible). This shifts responsibility from God to those who are opposing Him.

Additionally, the psalmist describes how this *provoking* or *rebellion* truly hurts and pains God. In verse 40 we are told, “*How oft did they provoke him in the wilderness, and grieve him in the desert!*” The word “grieve” means “to hurt, to be in pain, to be tortured.” Another translation says, “*How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and pained him in the wasteland*” (New Catholic Bible). Therefore, using the word “provoke” in reference to God does not imply that people may cause God to lose His temper or reach His “breaking point,” but it does indicate that they can *break* His heart. Someone who embodies unwavering selflessness feels intense pain whenever that love is not reciprocated.

Which takes us to another crucial point: The Hebrew term translated as “provoked” in verse 58 is entirely different. The entire phrase “provoked him to anger” is derived from just one word, which is “*ka’as*.” “*ka’as*” can, among other things, also imply, “to be angry, be vexed, be indignant, be wroth, be grieved, to be troubled, have sorrow.” The decision to use “*provoked him to anger*” in the several places that employ the phrase was made by the English translators. The use of the term “provoked” (or even “anger”) was unnecessary given the range of other words that may have been used and was likely motivated by theological bias.

I’d even add that “grieved” or “vexed” would have been better options. Instead of God being enraged by their defiance, it is more in keeping with who He is that He was saddened or vexed, which indicates that He was wounded by their conduct and this caused Him emotional suffering. According to the “Book of Common Prayer,” it reads like this: “*For **they grieved him** with their hill-altars: and provoked him to displeasure with their images.*”⁸

To willfully insult God and drive Him out of our lives is to grieve and vex Him (Eph. 4:30; 1 Thess. 5:19). However, we are unaware of how vulnerable we make ourselves by hurting God in this manner. Take note of the following event from Judges 2:

*And **they forsook the LORD** God of their fathers, which brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods, of the gods of the people that were round about them, and bowed themselves unto them, and **provoked the LORD to anger**. And **they forsook the LORD**, and served Baal and Ashtaroth. And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and **he delivered them** into the hands of spoilers that spoiled them, and **he sold them into the hands of their enemies** round about, so that they could not any longer stand before their enemies. (Judges 2:12-14)*

We are informed twice that Israel worshipped false gods after abandoning God. After everything God had done for them, they deserted Him and turned to serving devils. This “provoked the LORD to anger,” according to the scripture. A self-centered individual who suffers harm grows enraged and seeks retribution. God, however, is selfless. He is others-focused. Therefore, *ka’as* in Judges 2:12 would have been better translated as “*and the LORD was **grieved** and hurt.*”

Typically, God will respond to the forsaking by reciprocating (Deut. 31:16-18; 2 Chron. 15:2; 24:20). However, this is not vindictiveness on God’s part. God simply will not stay forever where He is not wanted. To forsake God is to push Him out of our lives and demand that He depart from us (Job 21:14; 22:17).

As a result, the phrasing in the KJV where it states, “he sold them into the hands of their enemies” is a harsh translation and appears vindictive. A better rendering is, “*So the Lord let enemies attack the people of Israel and take their possessions. The Lord let their enemies that lived around them defeat them*” (Easy-to-Read Version). What other choice does God have when He has been hurt and pushed away? He cannot intervene to stop our enemies if we tell Him to “go away” while we worship our enemy’s false gods.

God’s Faithful Love

Therefore, translating “*ka’as*” as being “provoked to anger” does not give full expression to the loving character of our God. Scripture reveals that in the majority of cases where the Hebrew word “*ka’as*” is used, it is not God lashing out in anger at the rebels. On the contrary, God begins by pleading with them to cease such activity (Jeremiah 44:3-5). He does this because He has “*compassion on his people.*” However, they abuse His compassion and misuse the prophets God sends to turn them back (2 Chron. 36:15-16).

2 Kings 17 gives us a vivid historical illustration of this truth. In verse 11 we are told that the people, “... *wrought wicked things to provoke the LORD to anger.*” How did God react in this “anger”? He sent them prophets and they pleaded on God’s behalf with the people to repent (vv. 12, 13). That appears to be more like an act of *love* than *anger*. Regardless, the people refused to listen. They did not reciprocate God’s love. They hardened their hearts and continued with their idolatry (vv. 14-16). Then we are told again that God was “*provoked to anger*” (v. 17) but, rather than lash out with omnipotent power and destroy them, God simply left them alone to do as they wished. Sadly, this meant that the rebels were also bereft of God’s protection:

Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight: there was none left but the tribe of Judah only And the LORD rejected all the seed of Israel, and afflicted them, and delivered them into the hand of spoilers, until he had cast them out of his sight. (2 Kings 17:18, 20)

The Unlocked Dynamic Bible renders verses 18 and 20, “*he allowed their enemies to take them away from their country He punished them by allowing the armies of other nations to defeat them and take them away.*” Again, what choice did God have in all of this? God, in His graciousness, will strive with us for as long as possible (Gen. 6:3; Isa. 63:10; Acts 7:51; Heb. 3:15-17). But at some point, if we refuse to turn back to Him, He will eventually leave.

God fully respects the freedom of our will. Therefore, if the people did not want God, then He cannot stay where He is not welcomed. Sadly, when we push Him away, we also place ourselves in a position where we become open targets to our enemies who hate us. This “provoking to anger” is connected to God’s departure, loss of intervention, and non-interference in relation to Israel’s enemies in a number of other places in Scripture (1 Kings 14:9; 2 Kings 21:14-15; Ezra 5:12).

Therefore, God is not “provoked” in the sense that He lashes out to destroy rebels. Because He loves, He will not force His will on anyone. Neither will He use His power to destroy those who rebel and hurt Him. Instead, He will leave us alone if that is what we desire. However, we should never want God to do that. It is better to stay connected to our unselfish, always loving and compassionate God.

Chapter Ten

Does God Tempt and Entice Men to Sin?

Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man (James 1:13)

Based on our opening Scripture, most Christians assume that God never tempts anyone to sin. But then we come across statements like this one from the Lord's Prayer: "*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*" (Matt. 6:13a; see also Luke 11:4).

This is frequently cited as a blatant contradiction by those who seek to refute the Bible's status as a book that was inspired by God. However, honest Christians wonder why, if God doesn't tempt us in the first place, we must implore Him *not* to lead us into it.

The Master Keys to Interpretation

The way temptation is typically understood is as an enticement to sin. The typical job of a tempter is to do whatever is necessary to cause their prey to succumb. While James assures us that God does not serve as a tempter, a careless interpretation of Jesus' statement would suggest that God is doing so.

What is the solution to this purported contradiction? We resolve this by applying what I believe to be the *master keys* for interpreting all portions of Scripture that appear to be incongruous:

*And again the anger of **the LORD** was kindled against Israel, and **he moved David** against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah. (2 Samuel 24:1)*

And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel. (2 Chronicles 21:1)

According to one passage, the Lord tempted David to perform an unauthorized census on Israel, while another claims that Satan did it. “How are these passages ‘keys to interpretation?’” you may wonder. Some might say that they simply seem to be additional “Bible inconsistencies.” Let me elaborate. God was attempting to instill in the minds of the early Israelites the truth about *monotheism*, or the fact that there is only *one God* and that only He is to be served and worshipped (Deut. 6:4-5).

This was essential since Israel was surrounded by a *polytheistic* (religion of many gods) culture and was prone to quickly succumbing to idolatry. God was aware that at this point in the nation’s development, the early Israelites would not be able to handle a full revelation of Satan (John 16:12-13). God assumed responsibility for the things He had *allowed* Satan to accomplish in order to safeguard them (Job 1:9-12, 16, 21; 2:3; 42:10-11).

The time between the two volumes ranges from three hundred to five hundred years (2 Samuel was written possibly between 913 B.C. and 722 B.C. and 1 Chron. Between 450 and 425 B.C.). God realized that Israel was ready for more information about Satan’s schemes by the time Ezra wrote 1 Chronicles, so He instructed Ezra to shed additional light on David’s circumstances. Therefore, God’s moving David to sin is just figurative of God allowing another actor to act in a way that God could have prevented if He had intervened:

.... as GOD’s providence over-rules, and superintends all things; as from him we derived all our powers and faculties both natural and moral, and in him, live, move, and have our being; and

finally, as without these powers, we could do neither good nor evil actions; hence in a figurative, and less proper sense, he is said to be the author or cause of the sinful actions and volitions of men even when nothing more is intended, then that he permitted them so to do; that he upheld their lives and faculties by which they were enabled to commit sin; that he put them into such circumstances, as falling in with their corrupt tempers, made them transgress; withdrew his grace from them, left them for their former provocations, to their own obstinacy and blindness; and gave them up to satan, to be tempted by him. That this is the meaning of the above quoted scriptures, and that they do not intend that GOD makes men wicked by his own positive influence, must be evident from what is said in other parts of the bible. Thus, what is figuratively said to be done by GOD, is, with greater accuracy of expression, attributed to satan.¹

Another author explains 2 Sam. 24:1 in light of 1 Chron. 21:1, saying, “He is also, by a peculiar idiom of the Hebrew language, said to do, what he permits another to do.”² According to 1 Chronicles 21:1, the belief that God directly drove David to sin in 2 Samuel 24:1 is merely *figurative* and *idiomatic* of God’s non-interference when men continue in their desire to sin, as is clearly the case with David (2 Sam. 24:3-4; 1 Chron. 21:2-4).

Figure and Idiom of Permission

I refer to these as the “master keys to interpretation” because 1 Chronicles 21 sheds further light on 2 Samuel 24:1. Using these master keys helps us to understand another vitally important truth: *there are no contradictions in the Scriptures; there are only explanations.* What some individuals call inconsistencies are actually *explanations* of figurative Bible language. God had to make sure that His Word included

explanations in other passages for those of us who might not understand the idiom or figure because the Scriptures are rife with them.

Jesus Himself spoke using the idioms and figurative language of the Hebrew people, to include what we would call, the “idiom of permission” though He always provided an explanation of His language elsewhere (Compare John 12:40 with Matt. 13:14-15; Mark 8:17-18; Acts 28:27). The same is true of His instructions to pray, “*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*” James 1:13 also clarifies rather than contradicts the declaration made by our Lord.

Most scholars tell us that the word “evil” should have actually been translated as “evil one,” which is another title for Satan (Compare Matt. 13:19 with Mark 4:15; Luke 8:12). In the context, Jesus instructs us to pray for God’s protection from demonic devices. As a result, we must interpret the phrase “lead us not into temptation” figuratively rather than literally.

According to one author, deciphering these kinds of Bible passages depends on realizing that, like all Ancient Eastern languages, the Hebrew language frequently utilized “figurative expressions” to explain a truth:

Several general Expressions, in all Languages, frequently admit of, and require a Limitation: without attending to which, the true Sense and Meaning of many passages will not be rightly understood: And, as the Eastern Nations indulged themselves the most freely in the Use of strong and figurative Expressions, the Hebrew Writings may be observed to admit of, and require, more Limitations than perhaps any other.³

Though we are told that the gospels were written in the Greek, implying that this is the language that Jesus was speaking, He still used the idioms and

figurative expressions of the Hebrews. Hence, the above tells us that our Lord's teaching was figurative of God's permission rather than a straight-forward statement of His causation. The author, appealing to James 1:13, concludes, "Lead us not into Temptation, means, Suffer us not to be led into Temptation."⁴

Other scholars affirm that our Lord's statement is merely an Eastern or Hebraic figure of speech:

Now, in this sense, God cannot be properly said to tempt us: for he tempts no man to evil. Yet, since nothing can happen without his permissive providence, we find even this kind of temptation, figuratively, ascribed to God in scripture; and we therefore here pray to him, that he would keep us from the hour of temptation; that he would not leave us to ourselves; that he would not suffer us to be led into those snares, which may endanger our virtue. And this we have just reason to pray for, if we rightly consider our situation in life: for danger is around us, within us, and in every form.⁵

There is a peculiarity in the phraseology of this part of the Lord's prayer which requires some explanation. The mode of expression is a figurative one, and imputes that to the Almighty which he permits another to do. God cannot tempt any man to sin. He may and does, in mercy to us, permit our great enemy to assail us; but the act of permission does not constitute him the author. "Permit us not to be led into temptation." This does not so much refer to the act of temptation, as to the evil consequences resulting therefrom. It is not the snares of the evil one which we are to dread, but rather being led into and entangled by those snares. Satan is ever spreading his nets around, and he well knows how to fix them. My young friends, be guarded against the enticing arts of the unholy one. Trusting in your own strength alone, you would be sure to fall; but trusting in the God of Jacob, putting

all your confidence in him, and faithfully praying that he will not permit you to be led into temptation, you shall be preserved in the evil hour, and supported with strength according to your day.⁶

We are not to consider these words as implying that the Lord ever enticeth men to commit sin. For in this respect “God tempteth no man.” But such is his power and Providence in the world, that he is sometimes figuratively spoken of in scripture, as actually doing, what he merely permits his creatures to do, or suffers evil spirits to do to them. And when after a profession of devotedness to him, we renounce our allegiance, despise his grace, and withdraw ourselves from his service, he may permit us to become his prey to our spiritual enemies, the world, the flesh, and the devil, in order the more deeply to convince us that “the way of the transgressor is hard.”⁷

The words of our Lord are interpreted by James 1:13 in the same way that the figurative language in 2 Samuel 24:1 is explained by 1 Chronicles 21:1, demonstrating to us that Jesus was not urging us to ask God not to tempt us, but rather, don’t leave us alone to be overpowered by satanic attacks. Our Lord is telling us to have faith in God to keep us safe from the enemy.

Interpreting Difficult Passages of Scripture

When we apply these master keys of interpretation to Scripture, many passages become clear. For example, the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart has been a source of consternation for both Christians and non-believers alike.

Scripture indicates that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart at least six times (Exodus 4:21; 9:12; 10:20; 11:10; 14:4, 8). Scripture also asserts that the process of sin results in the hardening of one’s heart, “.... *lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin*” (Heb. 3:13). Is God the author of sin? Certainly not. Utilizing the

master keys of interpretation found in 2 Sam. 24:1 and 1 Chron. 21:1, we've learned to let Scripture interpret and speak for itself:

Several times before, it is said, in the narrative, either that the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, or that Pharaoh hardened his heart; but now, first, it is said that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Hence, it seems fair to infer that God hardens men's hearts, or withdraws those influences by which the process of hardening the heart is counteracted and opposed, only when they obstinately resist those influences, and persist in hardening their own hearts. **God, in the language of Scripture, is said to do that which He permits another to do**, who in so doing accomplishes, whether designedly or not, some end of His just and holy government. A remarkable instance of this way of speaking may be seen in the case of David's numbering the people. The contradiction is only verbal and superficial. The direct mover was Satan, who was actuated by his hatred of God's people, and his desire to do them harm. And God did not restrain him in his evil purpose, but suffered him to succeed in it, in order that David and his people might receive a salutary chastisement for the pride and worldliness of which their act was the flowing out and open expression, and, in the end, be benefited by a timely correction. The moving, on Satan's part, was active; on God's, simply passive and permissive. So, when Pharaoh hardens his heart, God is said to harden it, because He allows him to harden it, in order, thereby, more effectively and splendidly to accomplish the beneficent designs of His holy government towards His people.⁸ (Emphasis added)

It is worth noting that Pharaoh is said to have hardened his own heart four times (Ex. 8:15; 8:32; 9:34; 1 Sam. 6:6). According to one account, Pharaoh, "... *sinned yet more, and hardened his heart*" (Exodus 9:34). Pharaoh admits to having sinned when he hardened his

heart (Ex. 9:27). Given that God never tempts a man to sin, it is appropriate to accept the latter texts to explain the former.

This method of interpretation is explained by Jesus. When Jesus said in John 12:40, “*He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart,*” He implied that God hardened hearts. In Mark 8:17, He stated that this hardening was the individual’s choice, asking, “*have ye your heart yet hardened?*” As a result, we must apply the same figurative interpretation to God hardening Pharaoh’s heart that we do to our Lord’s words, “lead us not into temptation”:

Where it is said, God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, we are to understand, that God gave him up to the hardness and impenitency of his own heart, as **by a figure of speech frequent in Scripture, He is often said to do that, which he permits to be done** God cannot be the author of sin, for we know “He cannot be tempted of evil, neither tempteth he any man, but every man is tempted (as saith St. James) when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed; but if men will “set at nought his counsel, and have none of his reproof,” he may justly leave them to themselves, and give them over to a reprobate mind.⁹ (Emphasis added)

The great Protestant reformer, Philip Melancthon also wrote, “The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is a Hebrew figure of speech which signifies permission, not an efficient will; as, Lead us not into temptation, means, permit us not to be led into temptation.”¹⁰ We conclude that every passage of Scripture that portrays God as the tempter of men and the author of sin must be read in light of this truth.

Chapter Eleven

Is God Vindictive?

*Recompense to no man evil for evil Dearly beloved, **avenge not yourselves**, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, **Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord**. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. (Romans 12:17a, 19, 20)*

There are numerous places in Scripture where God is said to have *vengeance*, to *avenge* and to take *revenge*. Theologians have referred to this as God's "vindictive justice" and "vindictive punishment." However, when we use the word "vindictive" to describe a person, we usually mean that he or she is spiteful, unforgiving, constantly holding a grudge, and looking for ways to retaliate against someone who may have wronged them.

The Nature and Character of God

God commands His people to extend forgiveness to those who have harmed them (Matt. 6:12, 14, 15; 18:21-25; Mark 11:25-26; Luke 6:37; 11:4; 17:4; Acts 7:60; 1 Cor. 2:7-10; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:12-13). Furthermore, throughout Scripture God has forewarned against harboring resentments and having a retaliatory attitude (Ex. 23:4-5; Job 31:29-30; Prov. 24:17-18; Rom. 12:14; 1 Pet. 3:8-9; 1 Thess. 5:15; 1 Cor. 4:12-13; Matt. 5:38-42; Luke 6:27-34). Moses wrote:

Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people,

but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19:18)

We are instructed not to harbor resentments or seek to make amends for wrongs done to us by others. In other words, God commanded His people to love their adversaries rather than acting in a *vindictive* manner.

To obey these commands is to emulate our Father and our Lord Jesus (Matt. 5:44-45; Luke 6:35-36; 23:34; Eph. 4:30-32; 1 Pet. 2:20-23; 1 John 3:10-12; 4:7-11). This is due to the fact that God's nature is characterized by mercy, forgiveness, and love:

And refused to obey, neither were mindful of thy wonders that thou didst among them; but hardened their necks, and in their rebellion appointed a captain to return to their bondage: but thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and forsookest them not. (Neh. 9:17)

The New International Version says, "*But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.*" God is "ready to pardon" because forgiveness is an essential aspect of His nature. Similarly, in the psalms we read, "*You, Lord, **are forgiving** and good, abounding in love to all who call to you*" (Psalm 86:5; New international Version). The prophet Daniel adds, "*The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him*" (Dan. 9:9; New international Version).

Scripture also attests to the fact that God is *slow to anger* (patient), and even when He does get angry, He does not hold on to it for any lengthy period of time (Psalm 103:8-10; Isa. 54:7-10; 57:16; Micah 7:18; Jer.

3:12). God is *quick* to forgive when He is wronged. Moreover, we are told by John that “*God is love*” (1 John 4:8b). Love is “*never resentful*” (1 Cor. 13:b; James Moffat NT), or, as another translation reads, “*it keeps no record of wrongs*” (Complete Jewish Bible). Many places in Scripture attest to the fact that God literally “forgives and forgets” (Isa. 43:25; 44:22; Jer. 31:34; 50:20; Mic. 7:19; Heb. 8:12; 10:17). This is the complete opposite of someone who harbors resentment for a very long time, even to their death. A person who is slow to rage and does not hold onto wrath, like our God, cannot, on the other hand, constantly seek retribution.

Despite the fact that the people rebelled against Him, God remained merciful, loving, slow to anger, quick to forgive, and quick to forget. This is the same God who loved the world and sinners so much that He gave His only Son to die in our place, proving His unwavering love and willingness to pardon even the most heinous among us (John 3:16-17; Rom. 5:5-10; Col. 1:12-14; Eph. 1:7; Heb 9:22).

Understanding God’s “Vengeance”

If God chastises us for being vindictive and affirms that He is a forgiving, self-sacrificing God, how can we reconcile this with the numerous places in Scripture where He vows vengeance on sinners?

Let’s begin with what Paul said in Romans 12:17-20. Understanding the phrase, “*but rather give place unto wrath,*” is the key to understanding God’s “vengeance.” Earlier in Romans, Paul wrote, “*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven*” (Rom. 1:18a). Several verses later Paul describes the wrath of God as that which “*gave them up to uncleanness*” (v. 24) or, as another translation renders it, “*So, God allowed [or, abandoned] them to have the impure desires of their hearts*” (An Understandable Version). Hence, God’s wrath is the loss

of His protection, or more specifically, when a person persists in sin and outright rejects God, God no longer intervenes to spare them from suffering the results of their disobedience.

Paul also wrote in Galatians 6:7, “*God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.*” When men persist in their sowing, unmoved by God’s constant pleadings to repent, then the automatic reaping that takes place as a result of their rebellion is described as God’s *wrath* or *anger* (Hosea 8:5-7). Jeremiah wrote, “*They will harvest a crop of shame, for the fierce anger of the LORD is upon them*” (Jeremiah 12:13; New Living Translation). The well-known scholar, C. H. Dodd, explained, “.... the wrath of God is taken out of the sphere of the purely mysterious, and brought into the sphere of cause and effect: sin is the cause, disaster the effect.”¹

Sin has its own inherent repercussions (Eze 18:4, 20; Romans 5:12; 6:20-23; 7:5; 8:1-2; James 1:13-15). Sin is automatically self-destructive (2 Pet. 2:1-2; Hos. 13:9; Prov. 1:31-32). Because God lovingly and mercifully withholds the consequences of sin, it does not destroy as quickly (Psalm 103:8-10; 130:3-8; Neh. 9:2-31; Lam. 3:22; Jon. 4:2; 2 Chron. 12:5-7; 2 Kings 13:22-23).

All of this supports Paul’s teaching in Romans 12:17-20. Paul’s statement is an amalgamation of several Old Testament Scripture passages (Prov. 20:22; 24:29; 25:21-22; Deut. 32:35). Paul’s allusion to God’s vengeance and repayment is based on Deuteronomy 32:35:

*To me belongeth vengeance and recompence; **their foot shall slide in due time**: for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste.*

Note the phrase “*their foot shall slide in due time.*” This means that one’s sin will eventually bring about the consequences that are inherent in the sin itself. David expressed something quite similar about how God administers His judgment when he wrote, “*in the net which they hid is their own foot taken*” (see Psalm 9:15-16; 35:8; 141:10). People fall into the trap that they set for others. God’s “vengeance” consists of letting something happen without interfering.

This truth is elaborated upon in the context of Deuteronomy 32. In verse 30, we learn that if God’s people are faithful to Him, they will be able to defeat a large number of enemies. Israel could be defeated by their enemies only if, “*The Lord, their God, had abandoned them; their mighty God had given them up*” (Deut. 32:30; Good News Translation). According to the Contemporary English Version:

How could one enemy soldier chase a thousand of Israel's troops? Or how could two of theirs pursue ten thousand of ours? It can only happen if the Lord stops protecting Israel and lets the enemy win.

In another instance, Jesus warns the people of Jerusalem about the destruction that will befall the city (Luke 21:20-24). In verse 22 Jesus said, “*For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled.*” How will these days of vengeance take place? When the people rejected Jesus offer of protection, they found themselves abandoned by God:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have

gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. (Matthew 23:37-38)

The Amplified Bible renders verse 38, “*Listen carefully: your house is being left to you desolate [completely abandoned by God and destitute of His protection]!*” Jesus mourned over the city; therefore, this is not something He wishes to happen (Luke 19:41-44). God, however, is unable to help when He is disregarded. As one scholar put it, “God in Vengeance of our Sins, and the Contempt of his Word and Grace, draws his Help and Assistance from us, and then goes it with the Sinner.”² Hence, God’s “vengeance” is the withdrawal of His protective presence:

That it is a most certain sign of his purpose to leave a people, and of his vengeance hard at hand, when he begins to withdraw the most lively and sensible tokens of his presence from those places where he was wont to dwell and show himself most familiarly.³

God’s “vengeance” is not to physically punish someone; rather, it is to cease interfering when His people reject Him. Keep in mind that God does not desire for this to occur. Instead, He is hesitant to allow this to take place (Hos. 11:8-9). But He must respect the decisions made by men (Psalm 81:9-16).

Idiomatic of God’s Non-Intervention

When God eventually permits the unrepentant rebel to reap what he or she has sown, and since, in the Hebrew idiom, God is often said to do that which He permitted, then the Hebrews referred to God’s non-

interference as His wrath and His vengeance (Eze. 24:8; 25:14; Nah. 1:2; Mic. 5:15). As a result, God's vengeance takes place in a permissive rather than in a causative sense. This is illustrated in the book of Ezekiel:

*For this is the day of the Lord God of hosts, a **day of vengeance**, that he may avenge him of his adversaries: and the sword shall devour, and it shall be satiate and made drunk with their blood: for the Lord God of hosts hath a sacrifice in the north country by the river Euphrates.*
(Jeremiah 46:10)

How will this “day of vengeance” take place? In verse 26 we are told, “*And I will deliver them into the hand of those that seek their lives, and into the hand of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon.*” The Easy-to-Read Version says, “*I will let all of them be defeated by their enemies—their enemies want to kill them.*” God's wrath is exacted not by physically harming the people but by declining to step in to defend them from those who would do them harm.

If this understanding is applied to all passages denoting God as having vengeance, then this would remove all apparent contradiction between His affirmations of mercy and forgiveness. An example is found in Ezekiel where we read:

*That it might cause fury to **come up to take vengeance**; I have set her blood upon the top of a rock, that it should not be covered.*
(Ezekiel 24:8)

According to the way we Westerners phrase things, this is a very violent image that appears to be more

of an act of anger and vengeance. However, more than 200 years ago, a theologian by the name of Robert Morres, in reference to this Scripture, applied the idea of vengeance to the Hebrew figure of speech in which God is said to do that which He only permits:

The twenty-fourth chapter of Ezekiel's Prophecies contains two points of doctrine applicable to this question, in addition to what has been already shewn. The first is, that **God is said to do those things which He only orders or permits to be done.** I forbear to bring other instances of this, which may occur to every attentive reader of his Bible, and confine myself to one in the seventh and eighth verses of this chapter. God is represented, saying of the city of Jerusalem, whose wickedness had now made it ripe for destruction, Her blood is in the "midst of her; she set it upon the top of a " rock; she poured it not upon the ground to " cover it with dust; that it might cause fury " to come up to take vengeance." He then immediately adds, that what she had done out of her wickedness was done by Himself: I have "set her blood upon the top of a rock," that "it should not be covered. **As God tempts no man, this must mean, that so daring and shameless 'a criminality was permitted by Him,** in order to set before the eyes of all men the equity of that punishment which was now to be inflicted.⁴ (Emphasis added)

Others have opted to demonstrate this truth by utilizing Pharaoh's heart's hardening as a case study for how God exacts His vengeance. In Exodus 14:17-27 where God is reported to have hardened the heart of Pharaoh, which led to his senseless drowning in the Red Sea, one author explains, "How soon can he take vengeance! He permits Pharaoh to discover his enmity and rage against Israel; and being blinded with malice and fury, he rushes into the sea."⁵

Alluding to the same incident, another author writes, “His heart still hardens, after all that both he and his people had suffered. God so permitting, and in the Hebrew idiom said to do.”⁶ God’s hardening is a Hebrew idiom in which God is said to do that which He merely permits. Other scholars explain that God permitting Pharaoh to harden his heart is His method for bringing about His vengeance:

For as God, when he would take vengeance of Pharaoh, had no more grievous way to do it, than to say, Exod. ix. I will harden the heart of Pharaoh: that is, as St. Augustine expounds it, I will take away my ⁷ grace, and so permit him to harden his own heart.

God no longer interposing to prevent Pharaoh from acting in a stubborn manner, while allowing Pharaoh the full exercise of his free-will to oppose God, is idiomatic of God’s vengeance. Another author explains how failing to understand this truth about Pharaoh is an injustice to God:

The Fifth Punishment, which is Hardness of Heart, consisting in Hardness of Mind, and Blindness in the Spirit: This befalls obstinate Sinners for their former Crimes, and wherewith God punishes them, either, that there happens to them such Things, whereby they could be converted, but through the Malice of their own Heart, they became hardened as Pharaoh’s was; or that God do not grant unto them his Grace and Spirit, which they have so long and so often resisted, that they could be converted thereby, as the Jews; or, that God permits Satan - to take them with his Snares, as Judas. They who are of Opinion, that God hardens the Heart of Men, because the Apostle St. Paul says, God hath Mercy on whom he will have Mercy, and whom he will be hardeneth. They do Injustice, for God hardens none; but Man being of his own obstinate Will,

disobedient to the Word of Admonition from the Lord; he is himself the Cause of his own Hardness of Heart, **though this Hardness of Heart is ascribed to God; since he of a just Vengeance over Sin**, taketh away his holy Spirit and Grace, from such abominable Contemners of his Word and gracious Means ; whereupon the Devil taketh full Possession of their Hearts, as a King of his Palace ; and they become like a Ship without a Rudder driving before Wind and Weather. We can not accuse God for Injustice herein, since they had so shamefully refused his Grace, also it is, that God is said to harden Man's Heart, although they themselves are the Cause thereof, in resisting the gracious Means offered unto them.⁸

God's "vengeance" does not imply that He has a vindictive personality because such would be at odds with His loving and merciful nature, according to the Scriptures and as confirmed by scholars who have labored to understand them. It is a figurative or idiomatic statement in which God is said to bring about the results of unrepentant sinful action that was in fact a part of the sowing and reaping cycle.

Given all of this, it makes sense that when God is claimed to be taking revenge, the word should be taken *figuratively* rather than literally. We should be able to reconcile God's "vengeance" with His selfless, others-centered love thanks to this insight. All are loved by God, and He desires to save all. Not all people, however, are willing to accept God's deliverance. Those who reject God automatically experience its effects. This was referred to as God's "wrath" or "vengeance" by the ancient Hebrews.

Chapter Twelve

The “Vindictive” Prayers in the Psalms

Thus, it is said, there are several imprecations against David’s enemies in the book of Psalms, which are inconsistent with the spirit of benevolence and charity. But according to the Hebrew idiom, these are predictions against the workers of iniquity, and denunciations of the divine judgments, unless men turn from their wickedness, and avoid the punishments which are threatened against them.¹ (Peter Smith)

In the last chapter, we discovered that a careful examination of the Bible demonstrates that God is merciful and not vindictive. Therefore, we can infer that when Scripture refers to God taking “vengeance,” it is using figurative language. It basically refers to His non-interference in the outcomes of individuals who reject His fervent and loving pleas to turn from actions that will result in their self-destruction (Hos. 13:9).

The “Imprecatory” Psalms

However, concerns will inevitably be raised about parts of the psalms’ wording, which seems to our Western thinking to indicate that David is cursing and pleading for the destruction of His enemies. These are what academics have referred to as “imprecatory psalms” (psalms that call down curses upon enemies).

The psalms contain possibly more than twenty examples of these alleged “imprecations.”² Let’s look at a very small selection from these psalms. One of them has this to say:

Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me. But thou, O Lord, be merciful unto me, and raise me up, that I may requite them. (Ps. 41:9-10)

The Common English Bible renders verse 10, “*But you, Lord, please have mercy on me and lift me up so I can pay them back!*” This seems to be at odds with other passages of Scripture where it is stated to, “*Recompense to no man evil for evil*” (Rom. 12:17). Additionally, the Bible says:

See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men. (1 Thess. 5:15)

Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing; but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing. (1 Pet. 3:9)

David seems to be pleading for God’s mercy in Psalm 41 so that He can exact revenge on His adversaries. Yet, the Lord Jesus taught, “*Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy*” (Matt. 5:7) and “*Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful*” (Luke 6:36). David’s request looks to be at variance with what our Lord and His apostles have spoken.

Another of many examples is when David appears to be pleading with God to curse his adversaries who persecute and curse him:

As he loved cursing, so let it come unto him: as he delighted not in blessing, so let it be far from him. As he clothed himself with cursing like as with his garment, so let it come into his bowels like water, and like oil into his bones. (Psalm 109:17-18)

From a Western perspective, the wording of this psalm again seems to be in conflict with what our Lord and His apostles taught. Jesus said, “*Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you*” (Luke 6:28; see also Matt. 5:44). Paul wrote, “*Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not*” (Rom. 12:14) and Peter said, “*Do not repay evil for evil, or curse for curse*” (1 Peter 3:9; Modern English Version).

The Psalms are Divinely Inspired

These psalms have undoubtedly unsettled many, especially because they appear to go against all we have been taught about showing compassion and forgiveness to our enemies. Because of this, some people have tried a variety of approaches to resolve these apparent conflicts.

One approach to dealing with this problem is to assert that David penned these kinds of psalms while under emotional turmoil and prayed (or maybe “sang”) them. It is implied that those psalms cannot be regarded as having been inspired by God. But all that David recorded in the psalms was referred to as God’s Word by Jesus and His apostles. Jesus denounced the Pharisees and referred to Psalm 82:6 as “the Word of God” and “Scripture” while doing so.

Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods? If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God

came, and the scripture cannot be broken
(John 10:34-35)

Jesus said that “the Scripture cannot be broken” or as the Good News Translation renders it, “*We know that what the scripture says is true forever.*” This is His stance on Psalm 82. Jesus therefore concluded that this specific psalm was divinely inspired. As we look at other quotes from Jesus, we discover that He valued the psalms equally with the rest of Scripture in revealing everything that would transpire in His redemptive work:

And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures. (Luke 24:44-45)

Again, Jesus emphasizes the significance of the psalms and refers to them as Scripture. We know that “*All scripture is given by inspiration of God*” (2 Tim. 3:16a). We also know that, “*holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost*” (2 Pet. 1:21). All of this is stated explicitly to apply to David’s psalms:

For David himself said by the Holy Ghost, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool. (Mark 12:36)

*Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled, **which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake before***

concerning Judas, which was guide to them that took Jesus. (Acts 1:16)

*And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: **Who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things?** (Acts 4:24-25)*

*Again, he [God] limiteth a certain day, **saying in David, To day, after so long a time; as it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts.** (Hebrews 4:7)*

Since Scripture itself attests to David's words as divinely inspired Scripture then we cannot resolve the illusory contradiction by denying this.

The Psalms are for Our Dispensation

Another effort to find a solution has been to assert that David prayed and penned these psalms during a different era. Consequently, it was appropriate for David but not for the current dispensation.

This approach, nevertheless, would necessitate a modification of God's character. God Himself sets the example of not taking revenge, thus if God inspired David to pen psalms encouraging the use of vengeance, then this conduct would also be a trait of God. However, the Lord never exhibits schizophrenia and His character never shifts (James 1:17; Mal. 3:6; Heb. 13:8).

It is incorrect to believe that God sanctioned the sin of vindictiveness in one period in history while

forbidding it in another. Just as He does in the current dispensation, God forbade vindictiveness in the old period (Ex. 23:4-5; Lev. 19:18; 25:21; Obad. 1:10-14).

David grasped this fact because he never exacted revenge on Saul or his family. Moreover, David penalized those who believed doing so would make him happy (1 Sam. 24:1-15; 26:4-25; 2 Sam. 1:1-16; 4:5-12). He did not respond or permit his men to respond when Shimei, a member of Saul's family, cursed David (2 Sam. 16:5-13; 19:13-23). Later, King Saul would acknowledge that David's decision to forgo vengeance served as an example of righteousness:

And he said to David, Thou art more righteous than I: for thou hast rewarded me good, whereas I have rewarded thee evil. (1 Sam. 24:17)

Is it therefore feasible that we misread what David actually wrote if he did not act vindictively toward his enemies? Furthermore, it goes against the intent of Scripture for God to use David to divinely record prayers and songs that are unimportant for our era. Paul references Psalm 69:9 in Romans 15, which, as we shall see, is one of the numerous "imprecatory" psalms. Paul then informs His audience that these Scriptures were written to the Christians in this age:

For even Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me. For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope. (Romans 15:3-4)

The truth is that a lot of people, even those who strictly follow dispensational dogma, do this inconsistently. They will find solace in the 23rd Psalm and other similar psalms while asserting that the so-called imprecatory ones are not appropriate for today. When it comes to how Scripture should be used, we cannot have contradictory man-made norms. Rather, we must learn Biblical principles that disprove the notion that the Bible contradicts itself in any way and that it cannot be applied consistently.

Imprecations and Hebrew Idioms

Reading these psalms is troubling since God clearly moved David and others to pray and write such prayers. Since we believe that the entire Bible is the divinely inspired, inerrant Word of God, and that it is all applicable to us today, reading these psalms is problematic. How then do we square them with the Bible's instruction to imitate God by benevolently blessing our enemies?

The Peter Smith quotation we used to start this chapter has the solution. According to those who are familiar with Hebrew idioms and figures of speech, these psalms are neither imprecations or malicious curses prayed against one's adversaries. These psalms are *prophetic* in nature. As another observes, "A literal rendering of the Hebrew idioms frequently conveys a sense not intended in the original Expressions which in Hebrew are prophetic, sometimes assume, in our translation, the appearance of imprecations."³

The so-called "imprecations" in these psalms are *declarations* and *prophecies* about persons who persist in wicked behavior and refuse to turn from it. There has been a lot of confusion because these psalms were translated into English as *prayers* rather than *prophecies*:

The expressions which in our translation of the Psalms, bear the character of *imprecations*, are for the most part, nothing more than *predictions*, regarded according to the strict idiom of the original Hebrew. Certain forms of construction in this language cannot be *literally* rendered into English, and hence arise many of the misunderstandings that prevail upon this and similar subjects.⁴

These psalms do not, idiomatically speaking, beseech God to directly bring about the destruction of one's enemies. Instead, they serve as a reminder of the unavoidable, negative effects of sin. Consider David's "prayer" for his foes, for instance:

*Lead me, O LORD, in thy righteousness because of mine enemies **Destroy thou them, O God; let them fall by their own counsels; cast them out in the multitude of their transgressions; for they have rebelled against thee.*** (Psalm 5:8a, 10)

The language strongly suggests that David is pleading with God to personally destroy his enemies. But according to some writers, the translation of David's words from Hebrew into English is not consonant with the Hebrew idiom:

In several of David's Psalms we meet with similar expressions, which sound to us like imprecations of evil on his enemies. But according to the idiom of the Hebrew language, the words, which sometimes are rendered as an imprecation, may, with equal propriety, be considered as a prediction. The passage before us is of this sort, and may run thus; "thou, O God, wilt destroy them. They will fall by their own wickedness. Thou wilt cast them out."

David does not imprecate destruction on the wicked as his enemies; but viewing them as the enemies of truth and righteousness, and the promoters of vice and misery in the world, he prays that such judgments may fall upon them, as will arrest the progress of their corruptions, and defeat their dangerous designs David's prayer, in the passage under consideration, amounts to no more than this, that God would banish wickedness from the land; that he would confound the implacable enemies of truth; that he would display before all men his love of righteousness and hatred of wickedness, and would cause the former to triumph over the latter.⁵

Another author concurs that this is an accurate translation of Psalm 5:10 and maintains that similar passages in the Psalms should also be interpreted in an identical manner:

When in our translation of the Bible, then, we find such expressions as the following, *Destroy them, O God; pour out thine indignation upon them; let them be confounded; let their eyes be darkened that they see not; let death sieze upon them;*--they are to be rendered, according to the idiomatic usage, in the form of prophetic maledictions, *Thou wilt destroy them, O God. Thou wilt pour out thine indignation upon them. They shall be confounded. Their eyes shall be darkened that they see not. Death shall seize upon them.* This form removes from David all appearance of an unchristian spirit, and exhibits him in the light of a prophet or type of Christ, predicting or denouncing the vengeance of the being by whom he was inspired. In this vengeance all must expect to share, unless it be averted by a seasonable and evangelical repentance. *If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be* (that is *he will be*) *anathema, maranatha.* Here we recognise the same idiom which runs through the Hebrew scriptures. The apostle expresses no wish or imprecation, but only utters a prediction of

what would and actually did befall the rebellious Jews. The prediction extends its terrible denunciation with equal certainty to all the finally impenitent and unbelieving in every age and country; and together with all the predictions or denunciations of judgments in the Old Testament tends to warn and alarm careless sinners, and to persuade them *to flee from the wrath to come*.⁶

Understanding the prophetic idiom in regard to the psalms helps us recognize that there is no difference between David's "prayers," which are prophecies, and the lessons in other passages of Scripture to love and bless one's adversaries. It also sheds light on how God genuinely inspired David to write.

Consequences Rather than Imprecations

The fact that both our Lord Jesus and His apostle Paul cited from these psalms as prophetic fulfillments from them confirms that they are predictions rather than petitions for retribution. As an illustration, consider Psalm 69:

21 They gave me also gall for my meat; and in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink. 22 Let their table become a snare before them: and that which should have been for their welfare, let it become a trap. 23 Let their eyes be darkened, that they see not; and make their loins continually to shake. 24 Pour out thine indignation upon them, and let thy wrathful anger take hold of them. 25 Let their habitation be desolate; and let none dwell in their tents. 26 For they persecute him whom thou hast smitten; and they talk to the grief of those whom thou hast

wounded. 27 *Add iniquity unto their iniquity: and let them not come into thy righteousness.* 28 *Let them be blotted out of the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous.* (Psalm 69:21-28)

Citing passages from this psalm and confirming its prophetic nature, Our Lord Jesus has the most well-known teaching on the idea of loving, praying for, blessing, and doing good for our enemies.⁷ Verses 22 and 23 are cited by Paul as a prophecy of Israel's hardness:

And David saith, Let their table be made a snare, and a trap, and a stumblingblock, and a recompence unto them: Let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see, and bow down their back alway. (Romans 11:9-10)

It's also crucial to understand that these are describing what God will permit to occur as a result of persistent, stubborn opposition rather than what God will personally do to impenitent sinners. According to a scholar's observation of Psalm 69:23, "They who loved darkness rather than light, by the righteous judgment of God were permitted to walk on in darkness."⁸

Additionally, in verse 27 where David declares, "*Add iniquity unto their iniquity,*" we know that God does not author sin (1 John 1:5; James 1:13-15). Therefore, as another author points out, it would be preferable to translate the Hebrew word for "add" (or "give" in other translations) in a permissive rather than a causal sense:

That in, to give, signifies also to permit, appears by Esther ix. 13, 102, let it be given to the Jews, i. e. permitted them. So Exod. xii. 23, and shall not

suffer—the Hebrew hath -the destroyer to come in; the Chaldee read, permit, and the LXXII, to the same sense. So Ps. xvi. 10, Thou shalt not suffer, give-thy Holy One to see corruption. And so, give wickedness, is no more than permit; for so it is ordinary with God, as a punishment of some former great sin or sins, though not to infuse any malignity, yet by withdrawing his grace, and delivering them up to themselves, to permit more sins to follow, one on the heels of the other; and so to be so far from reforming and amending, as daily to grow worse and worse, to be more obdurate, and so finally never to enter into God's righteousness, i. e. into that way of obedience required by him, and which will be accepted by him, or—as pix in the notion of mercy may signify, being applied to God—into his mercy, so as to be made partakers of it.⁹

God is not vindictive, and He does not command His servants to pray in a vindictive manner. Sin, on the other hand, has destructive consequences, and a loving God is compelled to warn against them. He will limit the severity of these consequences to a certain point in order to allow for repentance. However, God will eventually lift all restraints when people have become irrevocably hardened and there is no turning back (Rom. 1:24-28; Ps. 81:11-12; Hos. 4:17).

The sacred Scriptures will surely be misinterpreted if idioms and figurative language are not understood. People have falsely claimed that the Bible contains contradictions as a result of this disregard for Hebrew idiom. The idiom shows that in the case of the psalms, there is no conflict between the revelation of God's loving character and the foretelling of the pain that awaits those who fail to turn from their wickedness.

Chapter Thirteen

The Hidden Face of God

*There be many that say, Who will shew us any good? Lord, lift thou up **the light of thy countenance upon us.** Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased. I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: **for thou, Lord, only makest me dwell in safety.** (Psalm 4:6-8)*

The word “countenance” in verse 6 is derived from the Hebrew word “*pānîym*,” which is rendered as both “countenance” and “face” in most English translations. Verse 6 in the New Life Version reads, “*Let the light of Your face shine on us, O Lord.*”

Other translations associate this to God’s kindness and favor. The Good News Translation says, “*Give us more blessings, O Lord. Look on us with kindness!*” The Holman Christian Standard Bible reads, “*Look on us with favor, Lord.*”

The verse itself teaches us that God’s provision of good is related to the “light of His countenance” or the “shining of His face” because it brings God’s safety and protection. It would seem that the truth about God’s “countenance” or “face” is essential for God’s people.

Idiomatic and Figurative of God’s Presence

Martin Luther, a well-known Protestant reformer, wrote: “.... for ‘God’s lifting up the light of his countenance upon us’ is a most frequent expression in the scriptures, and is a peculiar Hebraic idiom.”¹ Another, theologian, William Cooke, added more detail:

In the Old Testament also this doctrine is clearly taught, but we find it represented by a different kind of phraseology—a phraseology more conformable to the Hebrew idiom. It is commonly expressed by such phrases as “The light of God’s countenance, and the shining of God’s face.” It will soon appear that these terms express substantially the same idea. the light of God’s countenance, or the shining of his face, signifies his favour, his love Thus, the people were taught to expect this blessing as an experimental privilege. Throughout the Old Testament we find the “light of God’s countenance” frequently spoken of in connection with pardon and salvation, and made to express a sense of God’s favour.²

The Hebrew word “*pânîym*” is rendered as both “countenance” and “face,” in Numbers 6, where God commands the Levitical priesthood to pronounce blessings over the people (v. 23), revealing that the exact same idea is being referred to:

The LORD bless thee, and keep thee: The LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace. And they shall put my name upon the children of Israel; and I will bless them. (Num. 6:24-27)

The word “keep” is from the Hebrew word “*shâmar*” which means to “protect, watch over, preserve, guard.” Once again, the “shining of God’s face” and the “light of God’s countenance” are linked to His protection, graciousness, peace, and blessing.

In fact, when we investigate this subject, we discover that the “shining of God’s face” and the “light of His countenance” brings favor (Psalm 44:3), salvation

(Psalm 80:3, 7, 19), revelation (Psalm 119:135), mercies (Psalm 31:16), help (Psalm 42:5), gladness (Psalm 21:6), and blessing (Psalm 11:7; 67:1; 89:15).

These advantages are all powerful indications of God's presence (2 Sam. 6:11-12). Once more, Martin Luther informs us, "For, in the Holy Scriptures, as is well known, face or countenance, signifies presence."³ The God's Word translation renders Psalm 4:6, "*Let the light of your presence shine on us, O Lord.*" It is fair to say that the "shining of God's face" and the "light of His countenance" is figurative or idiomatic of God's wonderful presence with His people.

The Loss of God's Presence and Protection

If the *shining* of God's face is indicative of His protective presence and powerful blessings, then the "hiding of His face" or the "setting of His face against" has the exact opposite effect. Whereas the shining of God's face and the light of His countenance ensured His favor, blessing, presence and protection, conversely, when His face is hidden or set against us, these blessings are forfeited, leaving us vulnerable to the desires of our adversaries:

And I will set my face against you, and ye shall be slain before your enemies: they that hate you shall reign over you; and ye shall flee when none pursueth you.
(Leviticus 26:17)

The Contemporary English Version says, "*and I will turn from you and let you be destroyed by your attackers.*" Job Orton wrote, "So it was upon every revolt, God withdrew his protection, and delivered them to their enemies."⁴ According to well-known Bible commentator

Matthew Henry, this is the unmistakable significance of God's concealed face:

.... that Israel went into captivity, not because God could not protect them, but because they had by sin forfeited his favour and thrown themselves out of his protection (v. 23, 24): The heathen shall know that the house of Israel went into captivity for their iniquity, that iniquity which they learned from the heathen their neighbours, because they trespassed against God. That was the true reason why God hid his face from them and gave them into the hand of their enemies.⁵

The book of Deuteronomy clarifies this further and in greater detail. Israel had the ability to have regular and significant wins over their foes as long as God's face was upon them. However, that potential would be lost if *“the one who always defended you, had put you in the hands of your enemies, that Yahweh had abandoned you”* (Deut. 32:30; Unlocked Dynamic Bible). Figuratively speaking, this withdrawal and loss of protection is portrayed as God “hiding His face:”

And he said, I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end shall be: for they are a very froward generation, children in whom is no faith.
(Deuteronomy 32:20)

Theologian Scott Thomas said, “.... when he withdraws his protection and blessing, (which is implied by the figurative expression of “hiding his face”) man necessarily sinks into misery.”⁶ God will “hide His face,” which means He will provide no protection or assistance against Israel's enemies. The Unlocked Dynamic Bible reads, *“I will no longer help them, and then I will watch and see what happens to them.”*

God no longer steps in to help when He hides His face; instead, He waits and observes what transpires. God will say, in reference to the false gods that Israel chose to worship, “... *let them rise up and help you, and be your protection*” (Deut. 32:38). This is because Israel will have initiated God’s hiding of His face by first abandoning the true God and then turning to the false gods of the pagan nations surrounding them:

*And I will surely hide my face in that day
for all the evils which they shall have
wrought, in that they are turned unto other
gods. (Deuteronomy 31:18)*

Adam Clarke commented on this passage, saying that “hide my face” means “Withdraw my approbation and my protection. This is a general meaning of the word in Scripture.”⁷ The Easy-to-Read Version says, “*And I will refuse to help them, because they have done evil and worshiped other gods.*” The Unlocked Dynamic Bible renders it, “... *because they will have started to worship other gods, I will refuse to help them.*” The psalmist elaborates on the idea that God’s concealed face signifies abandonment and a lack of divine support:

*Hide not thy face far from me; put not thy
servant away in anger: thou hast been my
help; leave me not, neither forsake me, O
God of my salvation. (Psalm 27:9)*

The psalmist recognizes the severity of God’s face being hidden from him. He understands that being abandoned by God is the worst possible situation. He is completely aware of the terrible repercussions that could result from this. In light of this, he sensibly implores God not to hide His face.

Pushing God Away

The fundamental cause of God being said to have hidden His face from or turned His back on His people is idolatry, as we witness throughout the Bible. This also teaches us that God's face being hidden entails His abandonment and deprivation of any help He would otherwise provide.

However, it is the people who first abandon God, leaving Him with no choice but to honor their desires. God told Moses that the people will “*go a whoring after the gods of the strangers of the land*” and as a result, “*will forsake me*” (Deut. 31:16b). It is only in response to this that God says, “*I will forsake them, and I will hide my face from them*” (Deut. 31:17b).

This is not vindictiveness on God's part. He is not the One initiating the break-up. However, even after His people turned to idolatry, God still found it extremely difficult to let them go because of how much He cared for them (Hos. 11:7-9). He continued to plead with them to return to Him (Jer. 7:13, 25; 25:3-4; 26:5; 29:19; 32:33, 35:17; 44:4-5; 2 Chron. 36:15; Zech. 7:7). No matter how often God pleaded with them they refused (Neh. 9:16-18; Psalm 81:8-12; Prov. 1:23-25; Zech. 7:11-12). Before God ever hid His face from them, they had already turned their face from God:

*Saying to a stock, Thou art my father; and to a stone, Thou hast brought me forth: **for they have turned their back unto me, and not their face:** but in the time of their trouble they will say, Arise, and save us. (Jer. 2:27)*

*And **they have turned unto me the back, and not the face:** though I taught them,*

rising up early and teaching them, yet they have not hearkened to receive instruction. (Jer. 32:33)

God finally hides His face from the people because they initially turn their faces away from Him. What more can God do after spending days, months, and years trying to reach individuals who repeatedly implore Him to “depart from us” in response to His love, patience, and mercy (Job 21:14; 22:17)?

God ultimately discloses to His disobedient people that their actions are to blame for this when they are confronted with the results of God hiding His face. In Micah 3:4 we read, “.... *he will even hide his face from them at that time, as they have behaved themselves ill in their doings.*” In Isaiah we read:

Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear. (Isa. 59:1-2)

The people initiated the process of God’s abandonment and separation from them, as well as the process of His face being covered. The VOICE translation reads, “.... *since you constantly reject and **push God away**, He had to turn aside and ignore your cries.*” Simply said, God will not compel someone to be in His presence. He will finally grant our request if we push Him away.

People who desire to keep God’s face concealed from them in order to continue sinning are the ones at fault, not God. According to Rev. 6:16b, those who are afflicted by countless plagues will wail, “.... *hide us from*

the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb.” Instead of repenting and turning to the One who had the power to stop the plagues they will continue to blaspheme Him (Rev. 16:9). Sadly, some people might become so firmly rooted in their wrongdoing that they would choose to carry on with it despite the pain it causes. Therefore, the issue is not that God is being vindictive by hiding His face. People desire to keep His face hidden from Him.

God is Said to Do What He Permits

Most scholars are agreed that there is an “idiom by which God is figuratively said to do a thing which he only permits to be done.”⁸ It is crucial to understand this idiom because God is frequently said to do some terrible things in the Bible.

The “idiom of permission” is explicitly supported by the “hidden face of God” idiom. Moses forewarned Israel that disobedience would result in God bringing terrible destruction. Moses said, “*Even all nations shall say, Wherefore hath the Lord done thus unto this land? what meaneth the heat of this great anger?*” (Deut. 29:24). God later revealed to Moses that Israel “*will forsake me, and break my covenant*” (Deut. 31:16). The destruction of the nation and the land in Deut. 29:24 is initiated by the people pushing God away, thereby forfeiting His protection over them:

Then my anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide my face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall befall them; so that they will say in that day, Are not these evils come upon us, because our God is not among us? (Deut. 31:17)

James Martin Gray explained, “When God says, ‘I will forsake them,’ ‘I will hide My face,’ etc., He refers to that withdrawal of His protection.”⁹ Though the other nations will say that “*the Lord **done thus** unto this land,*” the full truth is that God says, “*I will **hide my face** from them, and they shall be devoured,*” or as the Easy-to-Read Version renders it, “*I will refuse to help them, and they will be destroyed.*”

God had the power to protect His people from the destruction. However, they pushed Him away and He could no longer protect them. Therefore, God is said to have *done* what He did not intervene to *prevent*. This truth is also evident in Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 39:23-24

23 And the heathen shall know that the house of Israel went into captivity for their iniquity: because they trespassed against me, **therefore hid I my face from them, and gave them into the hand of their enemies:** so fell they all by the sword.

24 According to their uncleanness and according to their transgressions **have I done unto them, and hid my face from them.**

The Hebrew word for “gave” is “*nathan*,” as we have explained in a previous chapter means “permit, give over, be permitted”. The Unlocked Dynamic Bible reads, “*I turned away from them, and I allowed their enemies to capture them and kill many of them.*” While God claimed responsibility as if He had literally done it, it was not via the use of supernatural power but through non-interference, or, when He “*hid my face from them.*”

God is said to “smite” when He “hides His face” which is symbolic of the loss of His protective presence: “*I was wroth for the wickedness of his avarice, and I smote him. I hid my face from thee*” (Isaiah 57:17a; Wycliffe Translation). God is also reported to *consume* (destroy) His people in other places:

And there is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee: for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities. (Isaiah 64:7)

Another translation says, “.... *thou hast hid thy face from us and hast allowed us to wither in the power of our iniquities*” (Jubilee Bible 2000). In other passages of Scripture, it is claimed that God *kills* His people in anger:

They come to fight with the Chaldeans, but it is to fill them with the dead bodies of men, whom I have slain in mine anger and in my fury, and for all whose wickedness I have hid my face from this city. (Jer. 33:5)

The Unlocked Dynamic Version says, “*the men of this city whom I will allow to be killed I have abandoned them.*” Every time God is described as smiting, killing, destroying, punishing, doing evil, cursing, exercising wrath, etc. in the Bible, it is never through the use of His divine might. When His people reject His protection, He is said in the Bible to do what He merely permits to be done or does not interfere to prevent. God is not a physical killer or destroyer, though. These are the acts of men and devils (Ex. 12:23; Job 1:12-19; 2:3-7).

Chapter Fourteen

Figure or Idiom of Prophecy

*And the Lord said unto Moses, When thou goest to return into Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand: but **I will harden his heart**, that he shall not let the people go. (Exodus 4:21)*

In chapter 10, we discussed how Pharaoh's heart became hardened. We shall go more into the reasons for the employment of such terminology in the Bible in this chapter. We believe this will strengthen the case for God's integrity.

God Said to Do What He Predicts

We discovered that since God never tempts anyone to sin, statements of this sort need to be interpreted as figurative of His permission (non-interference or not influencing Pharaoh in his decisions). James Plumptre explains that "... it might be quite sufficient to say, that the best Hebrew scholars inform us, that the passages should have been translated, 'I will permit his heart to be hardened.'"¹ Plumptre further notes:

There is a sense—a figurative sense—in which God may be said to do that, which is the consequence of what he does, though he may not intend it, nor wish it to be done: as in this case of Pharaoh: what God did had the effect to make Pharaoh harden his own wicked heart, though it ought to have had a directly contrary effect, and softened it.²

Many scholars agree that the Hebraic culture, through its figurative and idiomatic terms, frequently

attributed to God's action what He only permitted or did not step in to prevent. We have stressed the significance of this concept throughout this book in order to get an accurate understanding of Scripture and a deeper appreciation of God's goodness.

The recognition of another Biblical "idiom" or "figure of speech," which I've coined the "idiom of prophecy" or "idiom of prediction," strengthens this assertion. According to David Russell:

According to the idiom of the Scripture language, words of an active signification are often used to express, not the doing of the thing said to be done, but the permission, or the prediction of it. Rev. xi. 2, and xiii. 5. Thus it is said, that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh, when all that is meant is, that he suffered him to take occasion from the respite granted him, or from his being "raised up," that is, preserved, to harden his heart himself.³

The fact that this was only a *prediction* of what Pharaoh himself would do is made clear later in the book of Exodus (Ex. 7:22; 8:15, 19; 9:34-35). Exodus 4:21 should not be seen as a declaration of God's personal intentions, but rather as a foretelling of Pharaoh's reaction to God. Thomas Chubb explains:

Here we see, that tho God is said to harden Pharaoh's heart, yet that stubbornness or hardness of heart is charged upon Pharaoh himself, as, in justice, it ought to be. For to suppose, that God, by his agency, injected stubbornness into the heart of Pharaoh, and then punished him for that stubbornness, is to impute iniquity to our Maker. And, therefore, when God is said to harden Pharaoh's heart, this is only a foretelling, that Pharaoh would harden his own heart, as is evident from the verse I last cited; in which Pharaoh is said to harden his heart, as the Lord had said.⁴

We are not being told in Ex. 4:21 that God will personally bring about Pharaoh's hardening. God is giving Moses a prophecy of what was to take place. As stated by Robert Tuck

This is the first mention of the hardening, and it should be carefully noticed that it is in the nature of a prophecy. In order to prepare Moses for the difficulties and seeming failures that will attend his mission, God gives him an anticipatory view of the providential order, and shows him what will presently happen in the regular course of events. Moses quite understood that God did not harden Pharaoh's heart to begin with. The hardening came about as the usual and providential judgment on persistent self-willedness; and Moses is told about it beforehand, so that he may be able wisely to meet the circumstances to which the hardening may lead.⁵

While there is very little difference between the two, the *idiom of permission* describes one as doing something one did not intervene to prevent and the *idiom of prediction* describes one as doing something that one only *foretold* would be the outcome of an event. But inside Scripture, these idioms cross paths and interact.

Prophets Said to Do What They Predicted

This terminology is utilized in locations where some of the prophecies made by God's prophets were attributed to them as if they were the ones responsible for bringing about the event. God instructed Isaiah, for instance, to make dull the people he was sent to:

*And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. **Make the heart***

of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed. (Isaiah 6:9-10)

It appears as if Isaiah was to personally bring about the nation's hardening, dulling, and blindness. Commenting on this passage, Edward Chandler wrote, "According to the idiom of his tongue, the prophet is bid to do that which he simply declares."⁶ Similarly, another writer explained this passage as follows: "Sometimes the agent was said to do, what he only predicted, or declared should be done, or to declare unto the people what has already come to pass."⁷ Other scholars concur:

Prophecies are sometimes delivered in the language of command, agreeably to the idiom of the Hebrew and other oriental languages. What is future is presented in the form of an injunction. When thus commissioned by God to declare a thing future, the prophets speak as if they had been appointed to do it themselves.⁸

For this people's heart-If the Hebrew be rendered imperatively, "Make the heart of this people fat," it must be construed as **a Hebrew idiom, in which any one is said to do what he predicts or permits.** Jer. i. 10; Ezek. xliii. 3. Isaiah was not sent to make the people stupid and obstinate: they made themselves so without his help.⁹ (Emphasis added)

Applying the concept of the "idiom of prophecy" to Isaiah 6:10, it becomes clear that God did not order Isaiah to use a supernatural power to cause the nation to become hardened, dull, and blind. The Lord was just alerting Isaiah to the people's inescapable response to his preaching.

Isaiah's phrase was later interpreted by the highest authority, our Lord Jesus, as a prophecy about how people will respond to the truth being preached:

*And in them is fulfilled **the prophecy of Esaias**, which saith, *By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes **they have closed.*** (Matt. 13:14-15a)*

God told Isaiah that this would be the result of his prophesying to the people because they would *choose* not to listen to him, turn a blind eye to him, and harden their hearts to His message. According to experts, a fuller understanding of Pharaoh's hardening in Exodus 4:21 is made possible by this interpretation of Isaiah 6:9-10. David Russell once more wrote:

Now, in translating a language, the idioms of which are different from those of that in which we wish them to be understood -the idioms ought not to be retained, for if they are, the meaning of the words is not given. Isaiah, for instance, is told to go and make the heart of Israel fat, and to make their ears heavy, and to shut their eyes; when the meaning is simply, that he should foretel that they themselves would close their ears, and shut their eyes, and harden their hearts.' Isa. vi. 9, 10. Matth. xiii. 15. Acts xxviii. 26, 27 In a word, when God is said to harden men, the meaning is, that he permits them to abuse his long-suffering, to the hardening of their own hearts.¹⁰

The Hebrews descended from Semites, as Samuel Ives Curtiss points out. He writes, "So ingrained is the ancient idea, through millenniums of oppression, that any

one in power is responsible for the failure of an inferior.”¹¹ Curtiss connects this to God’s instructions to Isaiah and His words to Moses in Exodus:

This is evidently a survival of an ancient Semitic conception, which we find gives coloring to certain Old Testament passages, as for example, when the Lord is represented as saying of Pharaoh: “I will harden his heart,” and Isaiah represents God as bidding him, “Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and smear their eyes” I do not, of course, believe that these passages teach that God leads man astray, but they are certainly colored by this idea.¹²

Exodus 4:21’s prophetic nature becomes clearer if we comprehend God’s prophetic language in Isaiah 6:9–10. God did not intend Isaiah to conduct the hardening, blindness, and dulling of the people for whom he was called to prophesy, any more than He expected Pharaoh’s heart to be hardened by an overpowering force. In all instances, it was claimed that the person did nothing more than foresee what would happen.

Prophets Called to Destroy

Jeremiah 1:10 provides another illustration that aids us in comprehending the idiom of prophecy:

See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.

To think that God was asking Jeremiah to *literally* overthrow and slay nations would be a leap. As one reads more into Jeremiah, it becomes clear that God actually wants a different result and is prepared to alter the prophecy if the people would turn from their sin (Jer.

18:7-8). Thomas Jackson elucidated this in reference to Jeremiah 1:10:

As the events followed the predictions of the prophet, he was said, according to a Hebrew idiom, to produce the events, though he was often nothing more than a sorrowful spectator of the calamities which he announced.¹³

The same way that God gave Isaiah the assignment to dull people's hearts, God Himself was merely proclaiming what He foresaw as the people's free-will responses. Similarly, God gave Jeremiah the assignment to warn the people of what would happen if they did not turn from their sins (Jer. 18:9-10).

As we observed with Isa. 6:10, Jer. 1:10 also aids in our understanding of the prophetic language in Exodus 4:21, which claims that God was the One who initiated Pharaoh's decision. Robert Young, a late distinguished scholar, wrote:

... because Jeremiah (1. 10,) was commissioned to foretell the desolation of nations, he is said to do it himself; and God, because he foretold (Ex 3. 19,) the obstinacy of Pharaoh, is said (in 4. 21,) to have produced it. The Hiphil (or causative) form of the Hebrew verb found here is often only *permissive*.¹⁴

The Bible itself serves as the best dictionary and commentary for interpreting the text. God ensured that there is an explanation for every issue we might have with one Scripture in another section of His Word. Therefore, by utilizing Jer. 1:10 to provide us with the essential knowledge of Exodus 4:21, we can help God escape the stigma of having created the sin that He later punishes:

When God is said to 'harden the heart' of Pharaoh, we are not for a moment to suppose that he who is

the source of all purity, implanted in the mind of the Egyptian monarch a principle of obstinacy in sin, or exerted any positive influence on him in this way; but simply, that he left him to his own heart's lusts, and gave him up to the hardening effects of sin. As Jeremiah is said to have been 'set over the nations, and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy,' (v. 10.) when the meaning merely is, that he foretels such things, so God is said to 'harden' when he simply intimates beforehand that so it shall be, and leaves the sinner to the consequences of his own folly.¹⁵

Despite Jeremiah's prophecies of devastation, the people would reject God and will face the consequences. The exact same terminology is used by God to tell Moses that despite all of his efforts, he must still expect that Pharaoh will harden his heart and resist God.

Jesus Came to Bring Strife

To better comprehend the idiom of prophecy and prediction, let's take a look at one more of the several instances we may provide on this topic. Jesus our *Prince of Peace* (Isaiah 9:6) whose will for mankind is peace (Luke 2:10–14) tells us that He did *not* come to bring peace but a sword:

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law.
(Matthew 10:34-35)

Jesus' sword will bring family strife, something He has stated elsewhere is in contrast to His love commandments (Matt. 15:4, 6, 19:5-9, 19; Eph. 5:22-26;

6:1-4). Nonetheless, the Lord, speaking in the idiom of prophecy in which, "... in the Hebrew idiom one is said to do that which he is the occasion of being done, however undesigned by him."¹⁶ William Day emphasizes the significance of understanding the idiom of prophecy:

Yet the distinction between the act and the permission of God is both just, and highly important; for, of that which God only foresees will arise, and determines to permit, he cannot with propriety be said to be the author; even although, by the dispensations of his holy and righteous providence, he may become indirectly the occasion of it.¹⁷

After outlining this truth, Day gives an example of how our Lord's prophesied words work in tandem with the prophetic terminology used to describe how God hardened Pharaoh's heart:

.... nothing more is signified, than the being passive while a thing is done, or at the utmost the allowing of it: in other instances the indirectly giving occasion to a thing is denoted by the same form of the verb. As the phraseology of the New Testament bears a close resemblance to that of the Hebrew Scriptures, it ought not to appear surprizing that examples of this, or of something equivalent, can be extracted thence. Our Lord, for instance, expresses himself thus, Matt. x. 34 i. e. to be the occasion of a man's being at variance with his father. When therefore God says, I will harden Pharaoh's heart, &c., the meaning is this, I have determined to permit the obstinacy of the King of Egypt to prevail to such a degree, -or perhaps, judicially to be the occasion of its so prevailing,—that I know he will refuse to let the people go.¹⁸

In response to predestinarians' criticisms, Edward Williams admitted, "that the scriptures ascribe to God the

causation of moral evil; as, hardening the heart of Pharaoh.”¹⁹ In response to these concerns, he specified:

.... whatever the import of such representations may be, no interpretation which is unworthy of God can be the true meaning—that the idioms of the sacred languages ascribing cause or operation to God must be understood according to the nature of the subject—and, what is particularly to our purpose, that active verbs which denote making, doing, causing, and the like, often denote a declaration of the thing done, or that shall take place; or a permission of it.²⁰

Williams continues by using other verses from the Bible to show how they can be read differently in this context. He demonstrates in the lists how the meaning of God’s statements to Moses and those in Matthew fit within the context of Hebrew idiom:

“And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart,” i. é. I will suffer it to be hardened. Matt. x. 34, 35. “I am not come to send peace, but a sword: For I am come to set a man at variance against his father.” That is, my coming shall be the innocent occasion of wars and variance.²¹

Our Lord was merely predicting the conflict that will arise within families as a consequence of the interaction between those who love Him and those who despise Him. The same is true of His teachings in the Old Testament, as Pharaoh’s heart would harden in response to the Lord’s attempts to free His people. God is a good God, but if we do not understand how to use idioms and figurative language correctly, our incorrect interpretation of the Bible will lead us to believe that He is the cause of evil.

Chapter Fifteen

Distinguishing Between Literal and Figurative

In interpreting, then, simply the words used in Scripture, the first difficulty will be to distinguish between those terms which are literal, and those which are figurative.¹
(Temple Chevallier)

The Bible uses a variety of phrases to describe God's deeds. Making the distinction between words being used in a *literal* sense and when they are being used in a *figurative* or *idiomatic* sense has proven to be difficult for many Bible readers. Failure to recognize these differences has frequently resulted in ideologies that denigrate God's nature and represent Him in an inaccurate manner.

We will examine this problem in this last chapter and offer a workable biblical methodology for determining if a word in the Bible is being used literally or figuratively or idiomatically.

Does God Literally Create Evil?

When the Bible employs the term "create," which is sometimes used of God in the literal sense and other times when it is used figuratively, people sometimes have problems telling the difference between the two meanings.

Unless one subscribes to the false theory of evolution, there is no reason to dispute that the word "created" in Genesis 1:1, "*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,*" is a literal translation. God is literally the creator of the material and spiritual cosmos. This holds true for the process in which God brought people, plants, and animals into existence as described in Genesis 1.

But does it follow that every use of the word “create” in the Bible in reference to God is a literal act on His part? Is it true that every Scripture that attributes a creation to God demonstrates the use of His omnipotent power? In Isaiah, for example, we are told that God creates darkness and evil:

I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things. (Isa. 45:7)

Many Christians take the word “create” literally in this passage. Some derive from Isaiah 45:7 the idea that every single thing in existence, both good and evil, originated with Him. This group claims that even *sin* is a creation of God. Another group of literalists reject the idea that God creates sin so will interpret the word “evil” as “disaster.” While this frees them from making God the author of sin, they still impugn His character by attributing to Him the results of sin such as catastrophes, sickness, wars and other kinds of *natural* evils.

Many interpreters overlook the fact that the passage also says that God “creates darkness.” While darkness is certainly used in Scripture as a metaphor for natural evil (Psalm 91:5-6; Ecclesiastes 5:17), it is also used as a metaphor for *sinful* evil (Job 30:26; Isaiah 5:20; 45:7; John 3:18-20; Eph. 6:12). Furthermore, darkness represents “unrighteousness” (2 Cor. 6:14) and hatred (1 John 2:7-11).

The worst aspect of this is that darkness is always used as a description of Satan and his kingdom (Acts 26:18; 2 Cor. 6:14-15; Eph. 6:10-13; Col. 1:12-14). Therefore, if one is going to take the word “create” in Isaiah 45:7 literally, they must also apply it to the term “darkness” and everything that this word encompasses rather than just using it to refer to natural disasters.

God Is Not the Creator of Darkness

We may see that the creation of any kind of darkness cannot be attributed to God in a literal sense by studying God's character, especially as our Lord Jesus Christ has revealed Him. Regarding the truth that the Apostle John originally discovered from our Lord, he writes:

*And it is this message which we have heard from Him and at present is ringing in our ears and we are bringing back tidings to you, that **God as to His nature is light, and darkness in Him does not exist, not even one particle.** (1 John 1:5; The New Testament: An Expanded Translation by Kenneth S. Wuest)*

A biblical law established by God is that all things are produced "*after his kind*" (Gen. 1:11, 12, 21-25). Nothing that deviates from a thing's nature can be produced by that thing (Matthew 7:16-20; 12:33-35; Luke 6:43-44; James 3:12). Since there is no darkness in God then He is incapable of producing anything that is dark.

In James 1:17 we are told, "*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the **Father of lights.***" By definition, a "father" is a *creator, author, or originator* of something. Scripture clearly states God's role as a "Father" and notes that He is not the author and originator of the harmful effects of this world's system:

*For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is **not of the Father, but is of the world.** (1 John 2:16)*

This makes it quite evident that not everything in existence originated with God. On the other hand, Satan is also known as a “father” (John 8:44). However, Satan can only produce lies, murder and other types of wickedness (1 John 3:8-15). Scripture clearly distinguishes between what comes from God and what comes from the evil realm (James 3:13-18). Satan’s empire of darkness is countered by God’s kingdom of light:

*To open their eyes, and to turn them **from darkness to light**, and **from the power of Satan unto God**, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me (Acts 26:18)*

*Stay away from people who are not followers of the Lord! Can someone who is good get along with someone who is evil? **Are light and darkness the same? Is Christ a friend of Satan?** Can people who follow the Lord have anything in common with those who don’t? (2 Cor. 6:14-15; Contemporary English Version)*

*I pray that you will be grateful to God for letting you have part in what he has promised his people **in the kingdom of light**. **God rescued us from the dark power of Satan** and brought us into the kingdom of his dear Son, who forgives our sins and sets us free. (Col. 1:12-14; Contemporary English Version)*

If Satan is a “father” who produces works of darkness then he, not God, is the creator of all that is dark. God cannot be the creator of any type of darkness or evil in the *literal* sense.

“Create” is Sometimes Figurative

Why does God claim to have created darkness and evil if Satan, not God, is its creator? The “master keys” for deciphering this kind of difficulty can be found in 2 Samuel 24:1 and 1 Chronicles 21:1, as we explained in chapter 10. In the former, it is said that God inspired David to conduct an illegal consensus, whereas in the latter, Satan is credited.

In Isaiah 45:7 God was addressing the Zoroastrian religion of the Persians. In this religion they taught that there were deities called *Yazads* that were supposed to be goodness and light. These were in opposition to other gods known as *Daevas*, who represented evil and darkness. They were both equal and at odds with one another.

The Israelites’ God, Yahweh, had to reassure them that He is the one true God. Even Satan cannot carry out his evil deeds apart from the absence of God’s protection, whereas God does not intervene to prevent satanic activity (Job 1:9-12; 2:3-7). To make sure that His people, who were constantly tempted to practice idolatry, understood that there was only one God, one supreme entity, and one Creator of the universe, God assumed responsibility for all that occurred (Mal. 2:10; Mark 12:32; 1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 4:6; 1 Tim. 2:5; James 2:19). As a result, God is frequently said to act in ways that He merely permitted or did not stop Satan from doing (Job 2:3; 42:10-11). Enoch Pond said as follows:

But how does God “create evil”? By a special exercise of power, such as he put forth when he created the world? Or is he said to cause, to create,

that which comes to pass in the regular course of his providence, and which he puts forth no special effort to prevent? It is in this latter sense, undoubtedly, that God is sometimes said in the Scriptures to harden the hearts of men, and to create evil. Pursuing the courses they do, men's hearts become hard under the providence of God, and nothing but a miracle could prevent it.²

Therefore, the word “create” in Isaiah 45:7 should not be taken literally here as it is rightfully taken in Genesis 1:1. While the Hebrew word for “create” is identical in both passages (*bârâ*'), the context of Isaiah 45:7 reveals to us the need to understand it exclusively as figurative:

To the same purpose, it is observed of the Hebrew word *Bara*, which signifies in the literal sense to create, whenever applied to God's bringing into existence what had not been before: yet, even that same word is applied in a very *figurative* sense in the Hebrew scriptures, as in Numb. xvi. 30. to extraordinary divine operations, in which there is no production of any new being; but it is used for the earth's being made to swallow up Korah and his company; and for the wonderful scenery, Exod. xxiv. 10. And for the moral renewal of the human heart, “create in me a clean heart, O God,” Psal. li. 10. and for the divine influences in his moral kingdom; “I form the light, and create darkness, I make peace and create evil.”³

While some uses of specific Hebrew and Greek terms in Scripture allow for their literal interpretation, this is not always the case. Whether a word should be interpreted literally or figuratively depends on the context, background, and subject of the text. While there are many topics in Scripture that can guide us in making this distinction, one of the most crucial ones is whether or not a literal interpretation casts doubt on God's character

while simultaneously contradicting other passages of Scripture that reveal His nature.

If a word's literal interpretation conflicts with what the rest of the Bible says about God's character, it should be interpreted as figurative or idiomatic. According to William Wilson:

Once more, it is contrary to the analogy of our religion to believe that God is the Author of evil. Now, there are many passages which seem to assert so much, and **which we must therefore interpret figuratively, or give up our doctrine**; as, for example: "I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil; I the Lord do all these things." (Is. xlv. 7..) Supposing that this translation of the original is correct —and we may remark that a mistranslation is not unfrequently the cause of this seeming discrepancy—the difficulty can be only avoided by qualifying the expression, as we term it, or spiritualizing its import. I create that which was originally good, but has been turned to evil: or, I have power, as a Supreme Creator, over evil; or, I permit evil to spring up and grow in the world.⁴ (Emphasis are mine)

According to Wilson, it may not always be a mistranslation of the passage or of the word itself (though we know that this has been the case in some instances). The issue could simply be an ignorance of how the ancient Hebrews used their words.

Wilson makes a reference to the fact that passages such as Isa. 45:7 are figurative of God's *permission* rather than His *causation*. We should always bear in mind that, "In the language of the Holy Scriptures, God is said to do what he only permits or suffers to be done."⁵ Hence, God's mode of "creating" evil of any kind (moral or physical) is by His non-interference:

When we say, “The man who just now walked freely out of the room created his own absence,” we use the words figuratively, that is, improperly. The act of walking is dignified with the term creating, and the relative effect of that act, which is a nonentity, is also dignified with a positive name as if it were a real existence. But surely one who justly discriminates would not infer from this, that the real idea, stripped of the figure, is anything else than privative. When Jehovah says, “I am the Lord, and there is none else; I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil;” **the mode of expression is figurative.** The substitution of affirmative terms can never alter the nature of the thing expressed. Divest the ideas of their figurative clothing, and their genuine nature will appear. “I create darkness.” Here the act of removing the light is figuratively called creating, and the effect of that act is properly called darkness. **The word “create” alone is here figurative.** Again, “I create evil.” Here, even supposing this term to refer to moral as well as to physical evil, the expression is evidently figurative, and the figure lies in the word create being substituted for the act of removing good. And the plain reason of the figurative mode is, that it represents more forcibly God’s dominion over light and darkness, joy and sorrow, good and evil.⁶ (Emphasis are mine)

God warned Moses that when the people experience bad things as a result of turning away from him, they will ask, “*Are not these evils come upon us, because our God is not among us?*” (Deut. 31:17b). Evil can only prevail where God is absent. Therefore, God’s “creating” evil is a figurative expression. All passages of Scripture that cast doubt on God’s loving nature must be interpreted using this same methodology.

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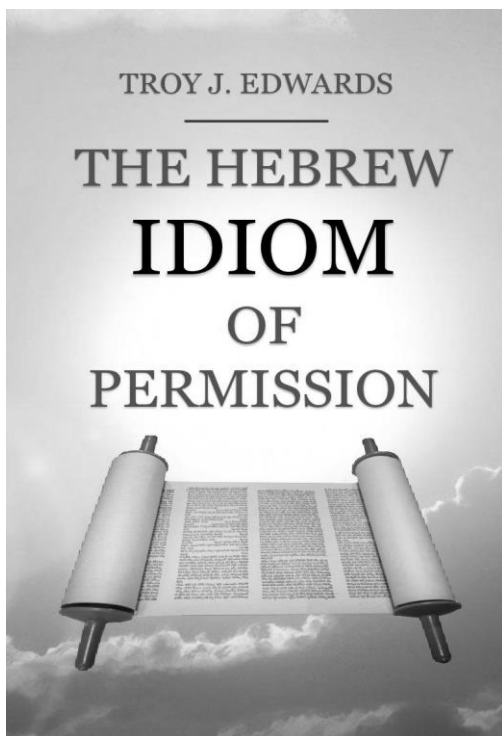
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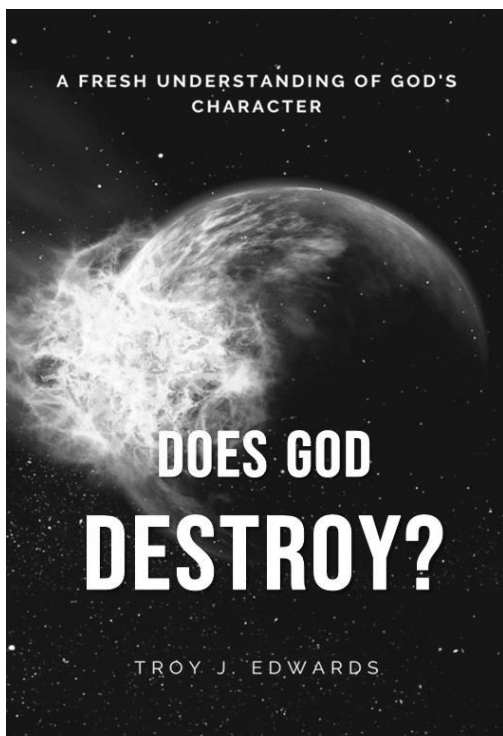


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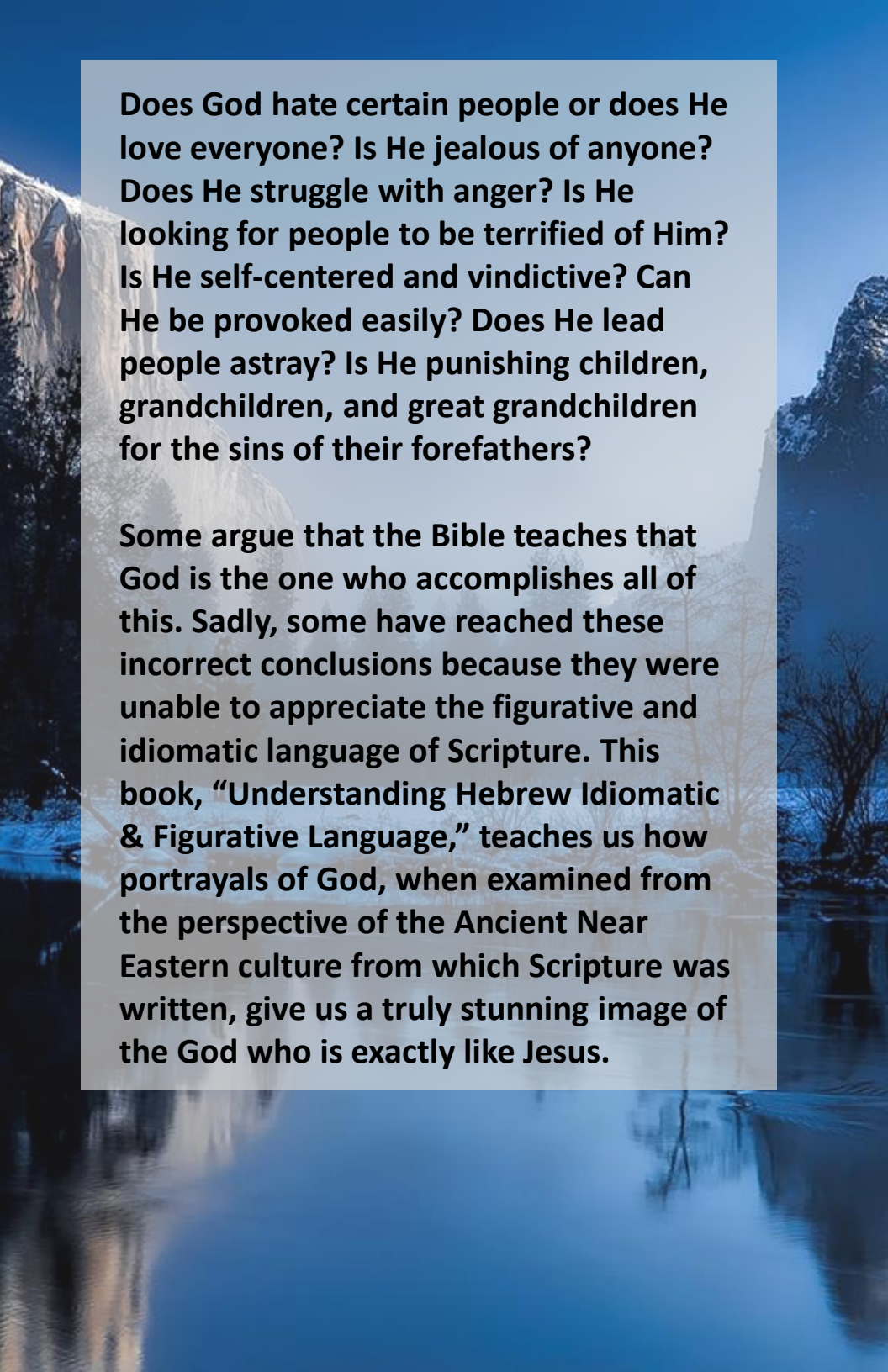
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