

A person stands on a rocky mountain peak, looking out over a vast landscape under a warm, golden sunset sky. The person is silhouetted against the bright light of the setting sun, which creates a strong lens flare effect across the top of the image. The landscape below is a mix of rocky terrain and sparse vegetation, with distant mountains visible on the horizon.

# GETTING TO KNOW OUR GOD AND JESUS

*By Sue and Jim Styles*

**TIDINGS** BOOKLET SERIES

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# GOD'S INCREDIBLE LOVE FOR US

**THIS** topic is one of the key first principles of our faith, yet it took me years to realize just how essential it is that we understand and appreciate God's love. I grew up in an ecclesial atmosphere so worried about the Evangelical Revival that most members did not mention or discuss the love of God. I have witnessed many interviews for baptism that never mention God's love at all, yet God intended it to be one of the greatest motivators in our lives to battle the devil within us. Jesus said in John 17:3, *"This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."*<sup>1</sup> Getting to know our God and His son, Jesus, influences how we live and treat one another by providing us with the most powerful motivation to resist our natural desires and instead choose to live like our God.

Our goal every day is to come closer to the way Jesus lived. The gospels show us how Jesus treated people and make it clear that he was showing everyone the eternal way of life of his Father. As Jesus said, *"whoever has seen me has seen the Father."* (John 14:9). We do become like the God whom we worship, so we better get to know Him as the loving, merciful Father He is, and grow our relationship with Jesus Christ His son, who *"has made Him known."*

How is your relationship with Jesus Christ maturing? If he returned today, and showed up to meet you, would your reaction be one of running away in fear and trying to hide like Adam

and Eve, or would you want to hug him and thank him for all he has done for you in changing your life? Do you view God as an angry Father who watches everything you do wrong and wants to punish you for all your failures, like Job's friends did? Or do you have a loving relationship with your God, seeing Him as a Father who dearly loves you, who greatly desires you to be in His family forever? He freely wants to show you mercy for your failures as you grow in His word. God sent His beloved son to engage in the battle with the devil to the end to show us how to resist Sin and trust Him. He is a Father who loves you so much He sends His angels every day to train you to understand Him so you will learn to live more like Him. Jesus put it best: *"If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."* (John 14:23).

We sometimes think this is just a New Testament idea, but God's love for us is throughout the Bible. When the angel passed by Moses to reveal God to him, the angel proclaimed the character of God:

*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and **abounding in steadfast love** and faithfulness, keeping **steadfast love** for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.* (Exod 34:6-7).

Moses reminded the people that they were:

*a holy people to the Lord your God;  
the LORD your God has chosen  
you to be a people for Himself...  
**because the Lord loves you, and  
because He would keep the oath  
which He swore to your fathers**  
(Deut 7:6-8 NKJV).*

God hoped that if His people understood and appreciated His love for them, they would respond by showing God's love to others. They should have learned to treat others with the same love, kindness, patience, compassion and mercy that motivated God in His treatment of His people—and so should we! Deuteronomy 10:12-20 reminds us,

*The LORD set his heart in love  
on your fathers and chose their  
offspring after them... He executes  
justice for the fatherless and the  
widow, and loves the sojourner,  
giving him food and clothing.  
Love the sojourner, therefore, for  
you were sojourners in the land of  
Egypt.*

When we experience and appreciate God's love towards us and recognize how He is doing so much every day to train and save us, it motivates us to show others the same love, mercy and patience. This changes our lives, how we interact with people, and our willingness to show love, compassion and mercy to others who sometimes fail in the battle with sin, just like us.

Our God has always been motivated by His love for us. Still, He expects that His love, mercy and patience will drive us to fight sin in our lives as Paul reminded us:

*Or do you presume on the riches of  
his kindness and forbearance and  
patience, not knowing that God's  
kindness is meant to lead you to  
repentance? (Rom 2:4).*

God's love for us is not unconditional! He expects us to respond by changing our lives to be more like His. We sometimes forget one of the great blessings in the promises to Abraham was that God would motivate people to resist sin. As Peter proclaims:

*You are the sons of the prophets and  
of the covenant that God made with  
your fathers, saying to Abraham,  
'And in your offspring shall all the  
families of the earth be blessed.'  
God, having raised up his servant,  
sent him to you first, **to bless you  
by turning every one of you from  
your wickedness.** (Acts 3:25-26).*

God does expect us to develop into His children, reveal His love, and learn to live His eternal way of life if we hope to join His family forever.

Although we may begin our relationship with God based on our fear of God disciplining us for all our failures, God hopes our relationship with Him will mature **to become based on love, not fear**. It's like a two-year-old child learning not to walk out into a busy street because they may fear the discipline they will receive, as opposed to that same child as a teenager who accepts and trusts their parents' guidance because they love their parents, not because they fear some discipline that may follow.

Love has so much more power to change our lives for good, than fear. Remember when Joseph's brothers

made up the story about the wild animal killing Joseph because they feared telling Jacob the truth? Years later when Judah pleaded with Joseph to take Benjamin's place, it was because Judah loved Jacob and could not bear to see Jacob deal with the loss of another son. Or as John puts it in 1 John 4:18, *"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love."* God knows He cannot give eternal life to those who primarily serve Him because they fear punishment. Once they were given immortality, their main motivation to serve would be gone! But if we are motivated by love, God knows that this will drive us to serve Him and love His family forever, because *"love never ends"* and *"the greatest of these is love."* (1 Cor 13).

God didn't wait until we were spiritually developed and worth saving to redeem us. He didn't hold out until we asked for forgiveness and mercy. His love for us drove Him to initiate a plan and carry it out so he could save us by his grace despite our ungodliness and sinfulness. Even though we:

*All once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and mind...But God, being rich in mercy, **because of the great love with which he loved us**, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. (Eph 2:3-6).*

An accurate understanding and appreciation of how God loves and acts should compel us to become more like Him in treating others when they spiritually fail. We must become more like our God and take the first step in seeking to save those who have missed the mark, provide a pathway for them to be restored in mercy and grace, and then prayerfully do our best to help and support their journey. Paul reminds us all that,

*When **we were still without strength**, in due time [at just the right time (NIV)] Christ died for the **ungodly**. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still **sinner**s, Christ died for us. (Rom 5:6-8 NKJV).*

God's love was real, planned for over 4,000 years, and it cost Him, and it was all for humans who did not deserve it! The Bible makes it clear in the lives of Jacob, Samson, David, the woman caught in adultery, Peter, and so many others that our God does not want to condemn us for our sins and mistakes. Still, He is very interested in what we learn from them and if we are growing in faith. God hopes that, like the woman caught in the act of adultery, we will *"sin no more."*

There are times when God's love for us causes Him to bring sad, devastating events into our lives or the lives of others to cause us to consider our ways or to demonstrate and grow our faith and trust in God. As God reminded His people through Isaiah, *"I form light and create darkness, I make well-being*

*and create calamity, I am the Lord, who does all these things.” (Isa 45:6).* Just as any Dad or Mom today must discipline a child, they love to train them, so our loving Father must discipline us through the experiences of life so we will mature into His children, learning to live His eternal way of life. We can completely trust that when God chastens us, *“God is treating you as sons”* and *“He disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.”* (Heb 12:7,10).

We must communicate to our children, grandchildren, and interested friends the love God has for all of us and that everything He does in our lives is done in love, for our good, because He greatly desires us to become members of His eternal family. We can confidently trust that whatever illnesses, accidents, financial troubles, family problems and ecclesial issues that God causes to surface in our lives, He is in control, working for our good to train us to become His children who live like the loving Father who *“of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.”* (Jas 1:18). It’s not easy to change us, with our nature so prone to sin, into children of God, but our loving Father has taken on that challenge and *“I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”* (Phil 1:6).

What a privilege we have today to have been called by God into His family. *“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.”* (1 John 3:1). Getting to know the love God has for us, that same love He revealed in

the life of Jesus, will energize us with a motivating power to change the way we live. Let’s respond to His love by keeping His commandments and loving one another with the kind of love God shows us every day. As John reminds us:

*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. (1 John 4:7-8).*

# GOD'S ELECTION OF HIS FAMILY (ROMANS 9)

WE grew up thinking, like the Jews did in the Bible that we were the only people God could save because we were the good soil, and the rest of the world was not. This is an area that, over time, we have had to modify and correct our understanding. As parents, we thought that if we raised our children by doing the Bible readings at home and taking them to CYC, Sunday School, and memorial meeting, we were guaranteed they would love the Truth, get baptized, and be accepted into the family of God. This thought was also a misconception! This article is not about who will be accepted at the judgment seat of Christ but who can join God's family and may be responsible at the Judgment Seat.

There are over eight billion people on Earth today. Does everyone get the same opportunity to join God's family? There are only around 60,000 Christadelphians alive today. Most of the humans who have lived on earth since the time of Adam never knew about the gospel of God. Were all those people who never knew the gospel bad soil who could never understand the gospel? We don't think so anymore.

Before reading Romans 9, we should read Romans 1, where Paul develops Gentiles' failure to attain God's righteousness. In Romans 2, he points out that Jews were even worse because of all the privileges God gave them, and they still did not attain God's righteousness. Then, in Romans 3, Paul concludes everyone has sinned

and fallen short of God's glory, so God intervened and justified His family by His grace, through faith, just as He had always planned. In Romans 4, Paul reminds us that "*Abraham believed [had faith in] God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.*" And finally, in Romans 5, he lays out how God loves His children and always intends to save them by giving them His free gift of grace.

It becomes clear that we would have no hope if God had not intervened in our lives. No one would be saved. Years ago, we used to tell our interested friends that if they would only read the Bible for themselves, with an open mind, they would find the Truth. But it turns out that is not true. Many of them did read their Bibles and knew them very well, maybe better than some of us! But they still did not see God's truth.

When Paul wrote Romans 9, he understood God's election of His family, which was developed from personal experience and inspiration. Paul had spent years studying the Bible, researching, and yet still persecuting the true believers of Jesus Christ until Jesus opened his eyes! Paul understood from personal experience that it is not about how much effort we put in to find God ourselves or help others to be saved, but rather, it is all about the mercy and grace God chooses to give freely. No wonder Paul reminded the Ephesians that it was all about what God chooses to do in their lives:



*That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.* (Eph 1:17-18).

That's not to say that we don't have to read and pray, but it is a reality check that no matter how much we read and pray, it is up to God to enlighten the eyes of our hearts. Without God's intervention and revelation in His merciful kindness to let us understand, all our efforts are in vain. When Jesus returns, he will convert billions of humans alive today, the same people we couldn't convert no matter how much we preached to them. We might think they are not good soil today, but Jesus will finally allow them to understand the gospel when he opens their eyes, like he did for Paul. The parable of the Sower is all about how people receive the gospel. Many people today will not **receive** the gospel, but when Jesus returns and opens their eyes, they will finally embrace the gospel of God.

This idea changes the way we preach today. We don't need to hammer the Truth into people. God wants us to present the gospel to them using our Bibles and demonstrating our way of life, patterned after the life of Christ. At the same time, we pray God will open their eyes to understand because it is up to Him to enlighten those He invites into His family—not us! Remember when the disciples asked Jesus why he spoke in parables? His reply was:

*To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given... This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.* (Matt 13:11, 13).

He clearly told his disciples:

*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. But there are some of you who do not believe..."* (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) And he said, *"This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."* (John 6:44, 64-65).

No wonder it says of Lydia that *"the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul."* (Acts 16:14-15 NASB).

The best Bible exposition on God's election of His family is in Romans 9. Paul sets out to explain to Jews that God chose to work almost exclusively with Abraham and his children for about 2,000 years. But since the death of Jesus, the gospel has been spreading among the Gentiles. He develops the theme that this is God's family, and God can choose whoever He wants to invite and enlighten for His family. It's not up to us. God designed it so no flesh will glory in His presence.

In verses 1-5, Paul had great sorrow and continual grief in his heart for his Jewish countrymen. They had been given so many privileges, but they would not believe and crucified God's Son.

In verses 6-8, Paul points out God's plan had not failed because God never intended to save every Israelite. God only invited and enlightened Isaac, not Ishmael. Abraham and Sarah devised a plan according to the flesh to have a child, Ishmael, but God did not invite Ishmael because he was a child of the flesh, not according to the promise of God. Abraham had pleaded with God, "*Oh that Ishmael might live before you!*" (Gen 17:18) because Abraham loved Ishmael and raised him for about fourteen years and taught him about Yahweh, his God. But God wanted to make it clear to all Abraham's descendants that God's family was based on God's choice and God's mercy, not how hard humans work or what they want. So Abraham accepted God's decision, sent Hagar away, and disowned Ishmael. A few years later, God told Abraham to take his **only son** Isaac, whom he loved, when testing his faith.

Paul revealed that God knew that many Jews would think He rejected Ishmael because he was the child of a slave woman, so in the next generation, God made it absolutely clear. Here's Paul's explanation:

*Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." (Rom 9:10-13 NIV).*

You can't miss the point! Rebekah had been barren for over twenty years, and then God caused her to conceive. Then, from two twins of the same dad and mom, God chose one and not the other before they were born or had any opportunity to do good or evil. God wanted the issue perfectly clear to all Abraham's descendants that their privileged position was because of what God did for them, not any works they would do. It's all about God's family, who God calls or elects, and His merciful kindness to train people to live by faith so they will reveal God's eternal life and His eternal way of life.

You may be thinking God made this choice because, in His foreknowledge, he knew what kind of people Jacob and Esau would become. But you missed Paul's point. Paul mentions nothing about God's foreknowledge but instead bases his exposition on God's choice before the children were born and had done anything! In Romans 1-2, Paul made it clear that no one would be saved without God's intervention. Jacob was not a better person than Esau by birth. God records in the Bible that Jacob was a schemer, trying to accomplish his will through deceit. But God intervened in Jacob's life and trained him to become a very different person—one of God's children. Genesis records the painful experiences God brought into Jacob's life, as angels disciplined him and changed him into a new man, predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. God did not do this for Esau. This situation shows the difference God's election makes in our lives. As Paul puts it in Romans 9:21, "*Has the potter no right over the clay, to make **out of the same lump** one vessel for honored use and another for*

*dishonorable use?*” Notice it is out of the same lump of clay. Not one out of good clay and the other out of bad clay!

It's interesting to note that the brethren who amended clause 24 of the BASF worded the addition as “the responsible (namely, those who know the revealed will of God, **and have been called upon to submit to it**)” because they realized responsibility is not just about knowing, but also must include God's calling. We can teach children and adults today about the revealed will of God, but if God does not call them, they are not responsible at the Judgment Seat of Christ. That may be hard to swallow and accept for many parents, but it is solid Bible teaching from God's perspective, not ours. This notion brings peace to many parents who have tried and tried to enlighten some of their children, like Abraham did with Ishmael and Isaac with Esau, only to find their children walk away. It's God's family, so He chooses and calls who He wants to include, not us. So we learn to pray and pray that God will choose to call our spouse, parents, children, grandchildren, or friends and not depend so much on our efforts to convert them. We do our part, but God does the calling and enlightens the minds. As Psalm 127 reminds us, *“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.”* Notice how the rest of the Psalm reminds us that we don't have to do it all ourselves and then leads on to children being *“a heritage of the LORD.”*

In Romans 9:14-18, Paul anticipates the Jew's thinking that God is not fair to choose some and not others. This thinking is humanistic! From God's perspective, no one deserves to be

saved, and it is only in His mercy and grace that anyone will be granted to enter His family forever. Paul reminds them that God said to Moses, *“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”* **So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy.**”

In Romans 8:30, Paul had already explained how God deals with mankind today. Of all the people alive today, some of them could be good soil. Of those, God predestined some to be called and enlightened. Some of those called respond by their own free will, and God justifies them. And some of those justified remain faithful to the end, and God will glorify them. That's how Paul explained God's calling and election.

The implications of this topic for our families and friends are that we must continuously pray that God, in His kindness and mercy, will call them into His family. We must do everything we can to teach them God's ways, but we also need to realize that it's God's choice to call them or not. We don't have to beat the Truth into them and can't choose who God will call. Then, if they do decide to follow God's ways, we have to thank God for his mercy and appreciate that He has done what we could never do—enlighten the eyes of their understanding. And if they don't respond right now, don't ever give up and don't live in the guilt that it's your fault! God may wait until a later time to enlighten them. Hopefully, this will bring some peace and trust to you as you raise children and grandchildren and share the gospel with your friends and neighbors.

God has graciously allowed you to understand the gospel of God. Don't waste your opportunity! Billions of people today

have not been given this privilege, but you have. Embrace it, appreciate it, and thank God every day for allowing you to understand. Then pray God will include your families, ecclesias, and friends in His election. Always remember that it's God's family, not ours. So, try to understand and cooperate with God's choices today to invite people and train them to join His immortal family of angels. "Thanks be to God for His inexpressible gift!" (2 Cor 9:15).

# GOD'S PUNISHMENT VS. DISCIPLINE

SOME of us have grown up with a relationship with God, much like Job and his friends. We viewed God as an austere judge, watching our every action, keeping track of all our failures, and ready to punish us for our sins. This view is a total misunderstanding of the merciful, loving relationship our God wants to have with us. Our heavenly Father loves us and wants us in His family forever. He sends His angels to guide us into His eternal way of life so we will learn to live more like Him. He sent His Son and was willing to put him through all the pressures of false accusations and a torturous death to draw us away from sin and become more like him. So why does our loving Father sometimes bring troubles and trials into our lives?

It's certainly not to punish us! The Merriam-Webster definition of punish reads:

1a: to impose a penalty on for a fault, offense, or violation.

1b: to inflict a penalty for the commission of (an offense) in retribution or retaliation. 2a: to deal with roughly or harshly. 2b: to inflict injury on: HURT.”

Did you notice all these uses of the word “punish” are connected with extremely negative penalties or retaliation? Do you think our God treats us like that? This idea came from pagans and some Christians who believe God is angry at all of us for our sins and wants to make us pay. But it is not the loving God of our Bible. An angry God who

wants to punish leads to a fear-based relationship with God, not a loving, trusting relationship. As John reminds us:

*“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us.”* (1 John 4:18-19).<sup>1</sup>

After meditating on and appreciating the love God has for us, we need to re-examine why He sometimes brings difficult trials into our lives. He challenges our faith through extreme, dire circumstances because He loves us, and He knows that these rough situations of life can cause our faith to grow and mature so we will be ready for immortality. It's not punishment; rather, the Bible describes it as instruction, discipline, chastening, or training. All the challenging experiences of our lives we find devastating and discouraging are carefully designed by our loving Father and His angels to change, mold, and train us to become His immortal children.

Sadly, Job had to learn this the hard way so he would no longer see God as watching his every move, wanting to punish him for all his sins. When Job finally realized that everything was designed to instruct him and save him as well as others from going down into the pit, he said: *“I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”* (Job 42:5-6).

Understanding God's relationship with us will change our relationship with Him. We will no longer fear what He brings into our lives, viewing it as punishment, but rather completely trust that God is disciplining and training us to become His children.

Look at how Paul presents this in Hebrews 12:

*It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.* (Heb 12:7-11).

Do you see the difference between punishment and discipline (or training)? God doesn't come after us to inflict a penalty or retribution for all our sins. He forgives our sins and works to train us to become more like Him so "we may share His holiness." (Heb 12:10). Everything God brings into our lives is positive, designed for our good and the good of others. It's like having a coach or teacher who talks to us about something we did wrong and then works with us to improve our lives. Who wants to play for a coach who

keeps track of all our mistakes and then punishes us with extreme exercises to make us pay? That doesn't develop a loving, trusting relationship that provides for growth and improvement. Thankfully, "*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" (Rom 5:8). God didn't make us pay, but instead, He developed a plan to change us, forgive our sins, and turn us into His children.

The implications of this topic are huge. God is the model we use for learning how to raise children and work with people in our ecclesias. If God doesn't punish us but trains us, we should have the same attitude and use the same language when raising our children. We don't punish them, but we show them the mercy of our God and then discipline or train them to change their ways. The same is true about how we treat our ecclesial members who fail through the weakness of the flesh. We don't make decisions about how to punish them, but we extend God's mercy and forgiveness while at the same time helping them to become more faithful to God's ways. If we talk about punishing our children or ecclesial members, they may come to believe God is punishing them throughout their lives, which is very depressing and discouraging. This topic can change the way we treat other people and hopefully help them understand the God we worship. We learn to treat them the way God treats us, but this only works if we correctly understand how God does treat us.

God has always been motivated by His love for all His children. The angry God concept of pagans and some Christians has crept into our Bible translations because many of the

translators believed it. The translators of the NIV and other versions even went as far as to render Isaiah 53:5 as *“the punishment that brought us peace was on him”* because they believed God made Jesus suffer the punishment we deserve. These same translators chose to translate this Hebrew word over 30 times in Proverbs, Isaiah, and Jeremiah as *“instruction,” “discipline,”* or *“chasten.”* How sad and misleading is that!

The angry God concept of pagans and Christians has also slipped into our community by our adopting the belief that God needed to provide Jesus as our intercessor between Him and us, so he could beg and plead with God to forgive us! Even our green hymn book has three hymns that refer to Jesus’s pleading with God, or being our Advocate (238, 249, 262), as though God needed Jesus to beg Him to forgive us and not wipe us out! We must come to better understand and know our God and His son, Jesus!

God has always wanted to forgive us, and He provided His son *“to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness.”* (Acts 3:26). He employs His angels every day as *“ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation.”* (Heb 1:14). As Paul developed in Romans 8, Jesus doesn’t intercede between God and us. He intercedes between our mind of the spirit and our mind of the flesh, to help us in the war against us. That is the same battle Jesus fought in the garden when an angel strengthened him, and he defeated the devil by praying to God, *“Not my will, but yours, be done.”* (Luke 22:42). God doesn’t need or want Jesus to intercede between Him and us. He already loves us and wants to forgive and save us more than

anyone! But as He grows a spiritual mind in us, we feel the intensity of the battle with sin and appreciate that the spirit of Jesus can at times strengthen our spiritual minds to choose God’s will, not our own. As Paul reminds us:

*Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.* (Rom 8:26-27).

This intercession is not to change God but to change us! We are the ones who need help to overcome and choose God’s will, just like Jesus in the garden. We must be strengthened to resist the sin our minds want to enjoy. This need is why the spirit intercedes *“according to the will of God.”* (Rom 8:27). God wants to help and strengthen us in the battle with sin. This help gives us the confidence that we *“know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”* (Rom 8:28). Jesus told his disciples, *“In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.”* (John 16:26-27). Jesus doesn’t need to ask his Father for us because God already loves us and wants the best for us. Here is the explanation John Carter presents in his book on Paul’s letter to the Romans:

You might still be thinking that Jesus is our mediator and stands between us and God to change

God, but that idea also came from Pagans and Christians. Jesus is never referred to as “our mediator” in the Bible. He is three times mentioned by Paul as the “mediator of a new covenant” (Heb 9:15; 12:24) just as Paul shows that Moses was the mediator of the old covenant (Gal 3:19-20). In the same way Moses communicated and taught the old covenant to Israel (Deut 5:5,28-30), Jesus is God’s mediator of the new covenant because he has communicated and taught it to us, both with words and by living it throughout his life. This has nothing to do with pleading with God to change His mind, but it is all about God providing a new covenant based on faith through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Make no mistake: God will punish the wicked! This concept appears all through the Bible. But we sometimes blend the passages about God punishing the wicked with how God treats His children. God did punish the wicked, unrepentant Israelites who refused to follow His ways, and He made them pay for their sins. But when dealing with His true sons and daughters, He disciplines and instructs them so they will change their ways and receive His mercy. Notice how Paul separates the believers from those who will receive God’s punishment at Christ’s return:

*Since indeed God considers it just to **repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted** as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels*

*in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the **punishment** of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might. (2 Thess 1:6-9).*

Most of the Old Testament is about God working with the community of Israel, a mixture of believers and unbelievers. Usually, the Jewish community had far more wicked unbelievers than believers. Therefore, God often had to bring punishments on the people because most of them were wicked. This situation is why, in the parable of the wedding feast, “*The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.*” (Matt 22:7). We may make the mistake of confusing God’s dealings with the Jewish community with how God deals with His children today. Our ecclesias are comprised of believers who willingly chose to be baptized and enter a covenant with God. That was not true of national Israel. When the Babylonians destroyed Israel, God punished many of the wicked, unbelieving Jews. But when some were taken captive to Babylon (like Daniel and Ezekiel), these were referred to as “*good figs.*” (Jer 24:5). Their removal to Babylon was not a punishment for them. However, it would appear that way to those without understanding. Instead, it was God’s way of saving His remnant.

If we are not careful, we might make the mistake today of thinking God is punishing either ourselves or our ecclesia because of the challenging circumstances we are going through.



In fact, He is working to save us, and we can have confidence that all things will work together for good in the end. This idea is why there are not as many references to “punishment” by God in the New Testament (only five in the NKJV), as in the Old Testament. It’s not because the God of the Old Testament was a vengeful God, versus the New Testament God being loving. We know He is the same loving God. Still, He was dealing with national Israel, a vastly different community through most of the Old Testament, as opposed to the New Testament ecclesias and our ecclesias today.

Let’s try to be more careful about how we discipline and talk to our children, grandchildren, and ecclesial members. We don’t want to give the impression we are punishing them or exacting some retribution payment. It is our responsibility to teach them about the love of God and then show them the great love, compassion, and mercy He has for us by how we treat sinners who are trying to live like Jesus but fail. Suppose we choose to raise teenage children with a fear-based relationship. In that case, it will eventually backfire, and our teens may walk away from the Truth because they never understood the love and compassion of our heavenly Father and that in everything, He works for our good so we may share His holiness. Our awesome Father greatly desires us to join His family forever. Let’s get to know Him better so we can truly demonstrate His eternal way of life to all we interact with in our lives today and understand why He brings some sad and challenging events into our lives today as He trains us to prepare for immortality in His family.

# GOD'S AMAZING FLEXIBILITY

ANOTHER area in which we have had to modify our understanding over the years is the matter of God's willingness to change His pathway in response to what His children ask of Him. We have learned to sit back no longer passively and wait to see what God will choose to do in our lives, but rather consistently talk to Him and ask for specific outcomes if it is His will. This approach to how God works in our lives makes prayer powerful. Our prayers are not only to impact and change us, but at times, they can impact God and Jesus and change how they might accomplish His will.

Consider the parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18. There's no doubt at all why Jesus gave this parable. Luke records that Jesus *"told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart."* (v. 1).<sup>1</sup> We used to call this parable "the parable of the unjust judge," but you can see by context that it really isn't so much about the judge as it is about the persistent woman. At the parable's end, Jesus says, *"And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?"* (v. 7). So the parable's point is to illustrate that God hears our prayers and may respond to our cries. Let's be like the persistent widow and keep asking and talking to God!

We need to be patient in our requests to God. It's His timeline and His family. Abraham and Sarah had to wait over thirty years to have the child of the

promise. Isaac and Rebekah had to wait twenty years to have children. Jacob waited almost forty years after holding on to the angel while begging him to do something to save his family, to see his family finally grow spiritually. Joshua and Caleb waited almost forty years to finally enter the promised land, even though they had not failed in their faith. David struggled and fled from Saul for about fifteen years after being anointed King to finally become King over Judah. Patience, patience, patience! It's God's timeline, and He wants us to grow our relationship with Him to the point where we will trust Him in everything.

## **Sometimes, God Will Accommodate Our Requests**

In Genesis 18, Abraham talked to the LORD and asked if He would spare Sodom if there were fifty righteous, then forty, and finally all the way down to ten. The amazing part of this incident is that the angel was willing to spare the city for Abraham's sake if he found ten righteous in Sodom. Abraham did not think it was wrong to ask and believed God could modify His plan if He found ten righteous in the city. Some might think that since Abraham talked with an angel, only angels, not God, can modify their plans. But the point here is that plans can sometimes be modified if we ask. Later, we will see that angels and God sometimes modify their plans because believers request a change.

Gideon was very afraid of the job God

asked him to do in Judges 6. Gideon twice asked God for a sign with the fleece, and each time, God was willing to provide the support Gideon needed to increase his faith. When the Lord told Samuel (1 Sam 16) to anoint a new King beside Saul, Samuel was afraid. He said to the Lord, *"How can I go? If Saul hears it, he will kill me."* (v. 2). So God compassionately dealt with Samuel's fears and created a plan to accomplish the goal without Saul knowing in order to protect Samuel's life. The LORD said, *"Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.' And invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do. And you shall anoint for me him whom I declare to you."* (v. 2-3). God could have just told Samuel to "Go as I told you!" but He understood Samuel's fears and modified the plan to help Samuel through it.

Remember when Hezekiah held his huge Passover and invited people from the north to attend? The Bible records:

*For a majority of the people, many of them from Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar, and Zebulun, had not cleansed themselves, yet they ate the Passover otherwise than as prescribed. For Hezekiah had prayed for them, saying, "May the good Lord pardon everyone who sets his heart to seek God, the LORD, the God of his fathers, even though not according to the sanctuary's rules of cleanness." And the LORD heard Hezekiah and healed the people. (2 Chr 30:18-20).*

Notice the direct link in the record that the LORD heard Hezekiah's prayer, so He healed the people. Our God is not a rigid ruler waiting for us to break a rule so that He can punish us! He is a

compassionate, loving heavenly Father who understands our weaknesses and is willing to bend the rules and accommodate us in our times of need. What a wonderful example of how we must learn to deal with our children and ecclesial members who are trying to aim at God's high standard but who, at times, fail.

Notice how Jesus handled the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15. Jesus tried to escape the Pharisees, who were attempting to drive a wedge between Jesus and his disciples. On the way to the region of Tyre, the woman of Canaan cried to him, *"Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon."* (v. 22). The disciples asked Jesus to send her away, and Jesus tried to explain to her he was sent to the lost sheep of Israel, but the woman kept coming (just like the persistent woman in the parable). Finally, when Jesus saw her faith, he responded to her continual pleading and healed her daughter. This healing may not have been in Jesus' plan for that day, but he responded to the sincere pleas of a faithful woman and modified his plan. In fact, not only was his plan for that day modified, but he realized God was showing him this was a turning point in his ministry and that he needed to go back to the Gentile area of the Decapolis, where he then feed the 4,000, many of whom were Gentiles! Jesus lived and responded much like God. He listened to the crying and pleading of a faithful woman and responded by modifying his plan to accommodate her needs. As we come to know our God and Lord Jesus better, we too can learn to respond to the needs of others, even if it involves modifying our plans.

## **Sometimes, God Will Change His Revealed Pathway**

Remember when the angels rescued Lot from Sodom in Genesis 19? They told him to *“Escape to the hills, lest you be swept away.”* But Lot said to them, *“Please, no, my lords! (v. 18).”*<sup>2</sup> Wouldn't you think that Lot would do whatever the angels asked after being rescued from destruction in Sodom by the grace of God? But he feared disaster would overtake him in the hills and he would die, so he asked permission to flee to Zoar, and the angels modified their plan to accommodate Lot's fears.

When Moses was gone for forty days up in the mountain, and the people rebelled, the LORD said to Moses:

*I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you. (Exod 32:9-10).*

But Moses pleaded with God, reminded him of how the Egyptians would view this, and also mentioned the promises to Abraham. So *“The Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.”* (v.14). This angel was ready to wipe out most of the nation right then and re-grow it from Moses like he had done earlier with Abraham. But because of Moses' pleading, God modified the plan. Notice that in the end, because of their unbelief, most of this generation died off in the wilderness, and God swore in His wrath that they would never enter His rest (Heb 4:3; Ps 95:11). In the end this did not change the result, but because of Moses' pleading and asking, God modified the plan to let them live

for now and raise the next generation. As God reminded Moses, *“Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book.”* (v. 33).

When the Assyrians invaded Israel and Hezekiah became sick, the prophet Isaiah told him:

*Thus says the LORD, “Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover,” but then Hezekiah prayed and wept bitterly. Before Isaiah had walked very far, God told him to go back and tell Hezekiah, “I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD, and I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria.” (2 Kgs 20:1-6).*

If Hezekiah hadn't responded and prayed, he would have died without a son, and one of his brothers or uncles would have become the next King. When God saw his sincere response, God agreed to add fifteen years to his life and deliver him and Jerusalem from the Assyrians. This is a dramatic lesson for when dreadful things happen in our lives. God is waiting to see how we respond, and He may change His intended pathway depending on how we deal with and respond to the situation and what we ask of Him.

## **Sometimes God Will Work With the Pathway We Choose**

Most of the time, we need to decide on a pathway moving forward prayerfully and then faithfully continue in prayer that God will bless our plan or make it clear that this is not a good pathway. In Genesis 24, Abraham made Eliezer swear not to take a wife for Isaac from

the Canaanites but to go to Paddan-aram to find a wife for Isaac, and God blessed Abraham's pathway. Note in verse 12 that Eliezer understood and used Abraham's method when he prayed that God would bless his mission and provide a woman who would give him a drink and water his camels. From Abraham, Eliezer learned that he could choose a pathway and then pray that God would bless that choice.

When Saul forced David to leave the land (1 Sam 21), he decided to live near Achish, king of Gath, in Philistine territory. David was very afraid of Achish, so he pretended to be insane when he came before Achish. We might think this was just a clever plan by David, but he revealed his fears and his dependence on God to bless this pathway in Psalm 34 when he wrote:

*I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them. (Psa 34:4-7)*

David completely put his trust in God's ability to bless the choice David made, and somehow make it work against all odds!

In Esther 4, Mordecai reminded Esther to trust that God could bless his plan to have Esther appeal to the king for her people. Mordecai didn't know for sure God would prosper his plan, but he did know that if Esther remained silent, she and her father's house would perish, and God would provide deliverance from another place. That's how faith works! We choose a plan to move

forward, knowing God can bless that plan, but also very aware that He might decide to go down a different pathway. It's all God's choice, but "*we know that for those who love God all things work together for good.*" (Rom 8:28)

### **God Can Even Use Our Mistakes and Sins to Bring About Good**

The most impressive case of this is in Genesis 50 when Jacob died, and Joseph's brothers made up a story about Jacob requesting that they beg Joseph to forgive their sin and all the evil they did against him because they thought once Jacob was dead, Joseph would punish them. Joseph clearly states that he knows, "*as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today*" (v. 20). Joseph learned how to forgive people who plan and carry out evil against him, by trusting that God is in control, and has the power to turn evil intentions into good for those who love God. God did this with the covenant with the Gibeonites in Joshua 9, and He even allowed David to father Solomon by Bathsheba after he committed adultery and murder. When Onesimus ran away from Philemon, God had Paul convert him and then sent him back as Philemon's brother in Christ!

### **Some Outcomes Are Fixed With Only One Pathway God Will Use**

The clearest case of this is when Jesus prayed in the garden for God to find another way to save us all besides his own crucifixion. Jesus totally understood that God's pathway can be altered, so he asked for another way. But at the same time, he realized that God fixes some pathways and will not be altered. So, he trusted his request to

his loving Father and submitted with “*your will be done.*” (Matt 26:42). You will find similar situations in Abraham pleading for Ishmael in Genesis 18, David pleading for the life of his first child with Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 12:16. Jeremiah had to be told not to continue praying for his people (14:11; 15:1). In all these cases God had determined a pathway that would not be altered, and faithful people had to submit to God’s choice and let His will be done.

### **The Lessons For Us**

This article has been all about the power of prayer. Our loving heavenly Father and Jesus, our Savior, listen to all our prayers. They have the power to accommodate us by making pathways work that we choose, or by changing pathways they have chosen. In any case, we need “*always to pray and not lose heart.*” (Luke 18:1) because we know they are in control. When we realize how flexible our God and Jesus are with us, it should motivate us to be like them and accommodate the needs of others whenever we can. Our faith must grow to become so strong that we believe God will bring about our eternal good no matter what others do to us, which pathways we have chosen, or what events are the will of God that we cannot change.

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thess 5:16-18).*

# GOD'S INTENTION WITH ANIMAL SACRIFICES AND THE DEATH OF JESUS

ONE of the areas we have been most surprised about needing to modify our earlier views is that of animal sacrifices and the sacrifice of Jesus. We grew up with a mistaken idea that we commonly hear today among Christadelphians about why God had people kill animals when offering a sacrifice. In our experience, most responded, "Because sinners deserve to die," which is a very passive way of looking at sacrifice. It views sacrifice as a punishment we deserve but doesn't require us to do anything. This idea is much the same as the belief many Christians have that Jesus died as their substitute. Both of these views generate thankfulness in most people, but they lack the daily motivation to take up their cross and follow Jesus in his death to sin. Although sinners do indeed deserve to die, that is probably not why God introduced and commanded animal sacrifices for so many years. Besides, do we really need a ritual to remind us sinners deserve to die when so many people are dying every day?

The "deserve to die" response links to our third article on "God's Punishment vs Discipline." If you view God as an austere or angry Father who wants to punish you for your daily sins, then your view of animal sacrifice, and possibly even the sacrifice of Jesus as well, is connected to punishment. You may tend to think the physical death of the animal represents the punishment

sinners deserve. You might even link the death of Jesus to this as well. But when we examine New Testament writers' explanations, they do not make this connection at all! Thankfully, God has provided the New Testament commentary on many Old Testament issues to help us understand what He intended His people to learn. When New Testament writers all say the same thing, it should end any disagreements or debates we might have on the issue.

Think about all the New Testament passages that are connected to the sacrifice of Jesus, and see if you can find any passages that link the death of Jesus to the punishment that communicates "sinners deserve to die." We haven't found any! Your mind might go to Romans 6, where Paul says, "*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" (Rom 6:23).<sup>1</sup> But within the context, Paul contrasts King Sin and the wages he pays out (death) with our loving Father who gives us a free gift of eternal life. No way does this indicate that God wants to punish His children for their sins, but instead, it shows He wants to give them the "*free gift*" of eternal life when they join with Christ in his death to sin.

The New Testament makes it truly clear that the lesson God wants us to take from the death and sacrifice of Jesus is that we must participate in his way of

salvation—dying to sin and living for God. Consider how Jesus develops the exhortation he wants his followers to take from his death on the cross.

*And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?" (Luke 9:23-25).*

Jesus doesn't link his death on the cross with "sinners deserve to die," but instead makes the connection that his followers must take up their own cross daily and follow him. This directive isn't about our **physical death** but rather about us actively putting our flesh to death daily, a **spiritual death** to sin, fighting the devil inside us, and living for God. Jesus didn't go through his life of obedience to God by putting the devil in himself to death to show sinners they deserve to die, but instead, he was trying to show sinners how to live as children of God!

As a community, we have spent too much time dwelling on the punishment we deserve, to the detriment of focusing on the new lives we should live as God grows His eternal way of life in us. Consider the words of Peter when he explains what the death of Jesus is supposed to mean to us:

*For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not*

*threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Pet 2:21-24).*

Peter doesn't mention anything about Jesus showing us the punishment sinners deserve. Rather, he points out Jesus went through all that suffering to leave us an example so we would follow in his steps by trying to put sin to death ourselves, just like Jesus did all through his trial and crucifixion. You see, the death of Jesus wasn't really so much about his physical death as it was more about a public demonstration of his entire life of resisting the devil in himself and doing the will of God. God wants us to participate in that way of life.

So often at baptisms, we read Romans 6 because Paul says we are baptized into Christ's death. Thankfully, we get Paul's explanation of what the death of Jesus should mean to us. He points out that we cannot abuse God's gift of grace by continuing to live a life serving sin because "*How can we who died to sin still live in it?*" (v. 2). Paul reminds us that when we were baptized, we were baptized into the death of Jesus, his death to sin. This thought should cause us to "walk in newness of life." The only punishment going on here is that we should punish sin by putting it to death like Jesus did!

Paul goes on to say,

*For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him*



**in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing** [destroyed, RSV] **so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.** (Rom 6:6).

Paul's exhortation to us about the death of Jesus isn't that we deserve to die; that's a passive application that doesn't require us to do anything. Paul wants us to be actively involved in joining Christ in his death to sin by putting sin to death in ourselves. If we missed the point, Paul clearly states, "*For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.*" (vv. 10-11).

Paul reminds us when we take bread and wine at memorial service,

*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? (1 Cor 10:16-19).*

He also points out that the lesson of crucifixion was about a way of life when he says:

*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal 2:20).*

When Paul wrote to the Philippians, he explained,

*Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth*

*of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."* (Phil 3:8-10).

Paul clearly understood that the death of Christ illustrated a way of life associated with righteousness from God that depends on living by faith. He never mentions anything about some punishment that Jesus went through for us or demonstrated for us. Paul always refers to Christ's death positively, calling us to participate by sharing his sufferings and becoming like him in his death.

In writing to the Galatians, Paul declared our responsibility to participate if we belong to Christ Jesus:

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. (Gal 5:22-25).*

In Romans 12, after eleven chapters where Paul clearly explained God's atonement without any mention of Old Testament rituals and sacrifices or even any reference to our internal devil, Paul finally declares:

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom 12:1-2).*

It's a "living sacrifice" because we continue to live while putting sin to death. Like Jesus, our minds are transformed to do the will of God.

New Testament writers and Jesus himself link his death to motivating us to participate with Jesus in his death to sin by resisting sin and living for God. It was all positive instruction about how Christ's followers should live as children of God. Thankfully, God has given us these New Testament commentaries to clarify what the Old Testament types should teach. We really can't argue with the New Testament writers! Why, then, did so many people misunderstand animal sacrifices? Possibly because we are so biased to look for lessons about God wanting to punish sinners instead of realizing that God was trying to explain how to change our lives to live like His children so He could invite us into His family forever. We tend to focus on the negative lessons rather than the positives. This concept was the standard way Christians misunderstood God for hundreds of years, and they may have influenced us.

So now look back at animal sacrifices in the Old Testament. Who did the animal "without blemish" (Exod 12:5; Lev 1:3) represent? The sinner or God's

Messiah? Most of us would agree it was Messiah, God's Son. He would be perfect, without sin. Then, when you lay your "hand on the head of the burnt offering" (Lev 1:4), it is an opportunity to identify with Messiah, connect with him, and indicate you want to live his unblemished way of life while at the same time recognizing your daily failures. God then wanted **you** to "kill the bull before the LORD" (v. 5), hoping you would commit to joining with the Messiah in his death to sin. Making his unblemished life your aim. None of this was supposed to be about punishment, but rather an effective way of illustrating how God's Son would live by putting sin to death. It also permits the worshipper to commit to joining Messiah in a death to sin! God used this ritual procedure as the basis to "make atonement for him." It was a ritual opportunity to identify with and participate in God's method of salvation, as illustrated in His Messiah. If God were trying to teach a lesson about the punishment sinners deserve, then the animal would have represented the sinner, not God's Son.

Further, God would have had the priest kill the animal as a judgment from Him and pour out the blood. Instead, God wanted the offeror to participate in the death because it represented death to sin. God was trying to teach His children how to live, not how He wanted to punish them.

The classic mistake in understanding animal sacrifice is to stop with the death of the animal without considering the rest of the sacrifice. Don't forget that the blood was sprinkled against the altar, reminding us that all lives belong to God, including God's own Son. As

Jesus said, *"Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."* (Luke 9:24). The animal was laid out bare on the altar. It was *"naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."* (Heb 4:13). Finally, it was burned in the fiery trials and sufferings of this life that refine our characters, so we conform to the image of Christ. Then it could ascend into the presence of God *"as a pleasing aroma."* (Exod 29:25). God wanted His children to understand that He could change their lives if they would identify with His Messiah, join him in his death to sin, and be found *"in him."* Then God would forgive their sins, and they could eventually enter into the presence of God Himself as a pleasing aroma. They needed to participate by joining Christ in his death to sin and striving to obey their loving Father in heaven, doing His will. What an awesome hope, illustrated through animal sacrifice, pointing forward to the life, death, and resurrection of God's Son and all those who would be saved through him!

That's a whole different way of looking at animal sacrifice versus substitution or as a punishment sinners deserve. God intended it to be an active training session to teach His children how to live as they identified with the life of the Messiah. As the Israelites lost track of the true meaning of animal sacrifice and turned to punishment and substitution theories, no wonder they got tired of performing sacrifices. If they had truly understood what God was trying to teach, they would have continued to look forward to and enjoy the worship, much like we do today at our Breaking of Bread services. We know we need constant reminders to

participate in God's redemptive plan and thank God for His grace and mercy. So when you remember the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in bread and wine at memorial service, which death are you there to remember? A passive one that speaks to you deserving to die for your sins, or an active one, where you are thankful for what God has done for you, realizing that you promised to die with Christ to sin when you were baptized. You re-commit to participate in Christ's death by joining his war against sin, *"becoming like him in his death."* (Phil 3:10). Think about it! Which one has the power to change your life?

It's wonderful how Jude blends God's intent with animal sacrifice to motivate us to identify with Messiah's way of life and the power of God to change us and forgive our sins so we can ascend into His presence, rejoicing. He concludes his letter with:

*Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless [without blemish, RSV] before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24-25).*

Hopefully, the five articles in this series have helped us get to know our God and Jesus, His Son. We hope it will help us all to live more like our Lord Jesus Christ. Being called into God's family is a great privilege, something we could never deserve. We must be thankful for this every day and not waste our opportunities. How extraordinary is the grace and mercy of our heavenly Father that He doesn't want to punish

us for our sins but is willing to send His angels to train us so we can learn to live like Him, like His eternal life? Although He may seem distant and so awesome at times, He invites us to talk to Him always and let Him know our fears, anxieties, and needs because He wants to respond if it can fit into His plan. Now we know that from the beginning, since sin entered into this world, He has done everything He can to motivate us to participate in His plan of redemption, even to the point of the torture and death of His Son. This example illustrates to us how His children are to live. *“Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* (1 Cor 15:57).

1. This is one of the places the Sopherim changed Yahweh to Adonai because they couldn't understand how Lot would call the angels "Yahweh." Google it!

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