

Violence in the Scripture

Reflecting the image of the true God

A history of human violence since the fall, and God's
unfolding program of his kingdom of peace.

Kent Hodge

Read the story of man's history from Genesis to our present time.
Find out how the fall brought violence into our world.
See what God began to do about this violence through his call of Israel.

Learn how God at first adopted Israel's sacrifice systems, as a way of atoning for sin, but gave a witness to move us all away from this violence, to restoring communities through mercy and care instead.

Discover how God's final act of setting man free from violence, was to become the object of that violence himself, on the cross. It was there that we learnt the true nature of our cultures and religions, and learnt the full extent of God's love for us all. It was at the cross that we learnt to accept his free forgiveness for ourselves, and to pass that forgiveness onto our neighbours and enemies. It was at the cross that violence, as our way of "fixing" the world, was stripped from our hearts. It was at the cross that God launched a new community, to free the world of violence, by an active pacifism, one in which God's people lay down their lives to serve.

Find out how God gave man freedom in the creation and then, after the fall, how God began to moved mankind and his whole cosmos to maturity, and from our violence to his kingdom of peace.

The Image of God

When violence erupts, we see time and again that Christians are heavily involved. We see it in our history and we see it today. We have heard it being preached from many Christian pulpits. We have seen it being carried out by great atrocities against non-Christians in our present time; things that are never reported on in the Christian prayer media. We have heard other Christians support, or even insist upon, with “prophetic authority,” violence through our modern armies. Why do we do this? How does this stronghold exist in global Christianity today, when Jesus is so clearly the Prince of Peace, who came in peace and is building a kingdom of peace to transform our world?

This book looks at some of the things we hear; the background theology that often supports a call for direct violent action, or a call to support the violence of our modern armies. We see violence in racism, in lack of care for the suffering of great numbers of refugees, in our indifference and personal wealth, while so many others languish. This is all violence.

We hear the background theology often. “God is violent, he punished sin on the cross.” “God is violent, his wrath against sin by destruction of people is all through the scriptures.” “God is violent, he sends people who don’t do what he says to everlasting fiery torment.” “God is violent, he killed every man, woman and child in the Promised Land.” “God is violent, he invented scapegoating, what we call sacrifice, to kill the innocent and punish sin.” “God is violent, the Psalms are full of calls to punish his enemies.” “God is violent, the Book of Revelation shows this in great detail.” “God is violent, before Jesus comes, he must punish all our enemies.” “God uses the good nations to punish the bad antichrist nations.”

I guess all of this maybe is just academic, until we have seen violence. When that happens, we get a distaste for it, in whatever form it appears. We get a distaste for it in our own lives, where it hides in our character. We want this Satan out of our lives and out of this world. This is God’s promise. This is what he came to do for us. The church is a fellowship of believers who, by God’s grace, are dealing with violence through their love for others, and through their love for their enemies. And this new kind of fellowship reflects throughout the world, and is the image of God that renews our nations.

What is God like? This is a very important question, because we are transformed into the image of the God that we worship. It’s important to have the right image of God. This governs our Christian growth. If we have an image of a “sometimes violent” God, then we will continue in that way of life ourselves. There is violence and clashes between cultures and sectors of society all over the world today. How do we handle this? How would God handle this? How we respond, will determine our future as nations and communities. It will determine how we reflect the Christian faith in the world, the type of Jesus we show to others.

Once a student asked in class, “How do we measure our Christian growth, or maturity?” We discussed that and found it is to do with us being transformed into the image of Christ. It’s about this character. So then, what is the image of Christ? What is Jesus really like? Some say he is non-violent in the Gospel accounts, but now in his resurrection and ascension he is violent against his enemies. Others even argue about the Gospel accounts, saying Jesus was also violent in his earthly ministry, like when he cleansed the temple.

Getting the nature of Jesus right is important, because Jesus is the exact image of God. Jesus exactly shows us what God is like. Jesus is the word of God. When he was baptised, the Father said, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him." It is essential that we interpret the whole word of God through the Jesus we see in the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). Who God is, in Jesus, the Jesus of the Gospels, is to be the governing principle of our lives. This is the God we come to know and follow. Christianity is about following this Jesus.

The central revelation of God, of who he is, is seen in Christ. And the centre piece of this revelation is the cross. Expanding that, it starts with the incarnation, his humiliation to take on flesh, his service and suffering throughout his life, and his dying for his enemies in love, instead of destroying them; his prayer, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." This is God, not just part of God, but the whole of God.

How can we process this? What does this mean for how we read the scriptures? What does this mean for our fellowship with others, our interaction with our whole community, including our "enemies?" How does this speak to us about our image as the church in the world? How does this teach us to interact with our "problem spots" in our own nation and in the world? How does this put God's road for our personal lives, and for his larger purposes for us in the world?

It is essential to have the correct image of God through the cross. It's not an angry god, punishing his son for us. It is a loving God, condescending in the incarnation and taking the suffering himself. This brings up all kinds of questions about justice and how the cross saves us. Do we see a god whose holiness is retribution against our breaking the letter of the law, or is God's holiness his forgiveness, his difference from human justice, his loving the sinner and transforming his life? Or, what is our main focus in religion? Is it ritualistic atonement, or is it transformation; a holy life and care for the widow and orphan?

In other words, do we handle our challenges in the world today with anger, walls and wars, or with mercy and reconciling service? Which kind of god are we following? How does God overcome evil and how do we follow him in this? How are we going to interact with our "enemies?" The way we see God will determine all of this for us. And this will determine the image of the church in the world, and the kind of future the church has in seeing nations transformed.

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Violence in Scripture

Do we worship a god of violence? In Greek mythology the god of war was called Ares. How much do we worship this god? How much has a god of violence hidden himself within our own theology? How much has Ares crept into our attitudes towards other people who suffer? Violence comes in many forms. Greed and covetousness are among the major manifestations of violence in the world today. They produce injustice and suffering on a massive scale, bringing about the same consequences as war and physical violence. The study of violence is a large study.

One way of looking at the gospel, at the whole of scripture, is to see God working in our hearts and cultures to bring down our violence. God builds a magnificent creation and mankind has been pulling it apart, abusing people and the rest of creation, while each person looks for his own interest. Paul calls this "creation groaning." This became the major theme of the Old Testament Prophets and also of the teachings of Jesus. God is reorientating our lives towards care of others, and this transformation of our greed impacts our whole environment with care. This is moving us from our earthly destructive kingdoms, to his new kingdom of reconciliation and restoration. With new redeemed hearts, we are joining God in his new-creation project.

History is rife with examples of humanity divinizing violence. Unfortunately, this is also the case with "Christian nations." Divinizing violence means that we give a divine sanction to violence. Violence is somehow sanctified. The nation that carries it out is "doing it for God." That nation becomes "God." It is "God" manifested in our world, "putting things right, correcting injustices, saving humanity."

It's the Superman syndrome, fighting "evil" with violence, "for truth, justice and our national way." This is how our violence is characterised. And the enemies of our nations are characterised as the demons. The violent are divinized and the enemies are demonised. This is common in our history and it is with us today. Violence is still religious. It is our "reluctant, but divine duty." Our generals become priests, our soldiers become saints. When we add religion to violence, our consciences are satiated.

One example is the First World War. Every European power in that war, on both sides, considered themselves to be God's agents in justice. This is what the leaders told their people, who formed their armies. Scandalous words were spread about the debauchery of their enemy's way of life. They "were doing the world a favour by fighting against them."

In reality, what was at stake was the interest of empire, nothing more than that. Each side in this war explicitly depicted the war in biblical terms. They claimed history was entering the Millennium period of the book of Revelation and that their enemy was Gog and Magog, which must be decisively and violently defeated. Russia, Britain, France, Germany and America all held to this view. The kingdom would come by blood. They all believed they were God's people fighting Gog and Magog. We still believe this today in our modern conflicts.

How can something like this happen? Is it because the masses in these nations were ill-informed? Or is this also commonly the view held by "more informed" Christians? How is that people like Hitler can arise in a Christian nation? Was it that Christianity was much worse in that nation? Or are similar views held in other "Christian nations," towards the weak and poor of the world, views which are also, actively or inactively, approved by the more informed Christian people?

How can such violence get into the normal thinking of Christian people, who purport to be following the Prince of Peace, whose kingdom is not of this world, who builds his community by care for the

suffering in the world, who calls us to beat our swords into implements of service, who died for us on the cross, giving us an example on how to love our enemies? How can such violent attitudes, or at least allowances, lie latent in our hearts and theology, like sleeping cells, ready to awake and come forth to approve of all manner of ungodly rhetoric when the “need arises” in our “national defence?”

How can such theology have a foothold in our thinking? Where does it come from in our minds? If we think that God approves of these things, then where do we make these mental connections in our faith? How can we see God as the kind of god who would approve of such? What areas in theology does a violent god still exist? The objective of this book is to search some of these areas out. What are the areas of our religious thinking which a violent god still inhabits? How do we construct this false god who approves of our non-Christlike views and behavioural patterns?

It’s not that conflict won’t arise in this world? It will, and often. It’s that we are supposed to view our role as Christ followers the right way. Before conflict comes, we are to build for justice for all. We are to work against conflict actively, by seeking to bring caring community to our world and to our enemies. When conflict arises, we are to seek peace between the parties. In Christ we are neutral. We aren’t joined to this party of that party in this world, to this or that group. We are of Christ’s party, which means we seek to love and serve all, without joining ourselves to any. We are called to find ways of “overcoming evil with good.” This is our part in the world.

Anger on the Cross?

I grew up in a Western nation. In the post Second World War period, this meant that religiously we grew up with an emphasis on a judicial faith. The book of Romans was read this way. "God is angry at the sin of the world and was going to punish it. But Jesus stepped in and took God's anger on himself and thereby saved us from the anger of God." This is how the holiness of God was seen. We said that because God is holy, he can't stand any breach of his law. His justice demands that every breach of law be satisfied with an equal punishment. "The law must be satisfied," we were told. Laws in Moses like "tooth for tooth" were said to express this. Justice was seen in this punitive sense. Justice was the equal punishment upon the transgressor.

"So," it was said, "God demands this type of justice because he is holy." But how could the punishment of the guilty bring justice to the one who was wrongly treated? Sometimes the principle of "tooth for tooth" pointed to a financial compensation to restore the victim. But many also saw the principle demanding retribution required by God due to his holiness. If I am slain and justice demands that the offender is also slain, how is that helping me? Or does retribution as an example stop crime? This was what the Pharisees thought. Jesus said that this is where the church is called to come in with grace and mercy to try to restore.

So, who demands tooth for tooth? Why is that in the law? Our normal answer to that is that God demands it. But if God demands that, then why did Jesus overturn that instruction? Jesus said, "You have heard it said, 'Tooth for tooth', but I say to you, 'Do not resist evil.'" This means, do not resist evil violently. "If someone smites you on one cheek, offer to him the other cheek." One of the problems here is that if God demanded tooth for tooth in the law, why is Jesus not demanding the same from his disciples in the way we encounter wrongdoing? This was the problem the Pharisees had with Jesus: "Why is Jesus overthrowing what God taught? Who does Jesus think he is? How could he be from God?"

But Jesus said he and the Father were one. He said, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." Jesus is God come in the flesh, so he can't be overthrowing what was in the heart of God in the Old Testament. They aren't against each other. They aren't different Gods, with different wills.

Jesus quite clearly threw out the law's teaching on "tooth for tooth." Jesus did this with a lot of Old Testament conventions. We will look at this in detail later, but take sacrifice for example. This was the most sacred institution to Israel, but Jesus threw it out. He said, "I have desired mercy, not sacrifice." This is similar to the "tooth for tooth" idea. Jesus said God didn't desire sacrifice for sin, to satisfy his holiness. God didn't require a judicial, retributive or legal form of justice.

Jesus also did this with the temple. This again was most sacred to Israel. It was where the law was satisfied, where all the sacrifices went on. But Jesus also threw that out, proclaiming that his body, and his people in the world, was the true temple. His people would bring justice to the world a different way. Not by demanding tooth for tooth, but by offering themselves to serve to restore the poor and weak. This is what we call restorative justice, helping to deliver the captive, rather than to punish the sinner, and this is what we see in Jesus' actions in going to the cross. The cross is restorative, not punitive, justice. This is God's holiness.

We have often been taught that God is angry at sin and that he must punish sin, because his holiness demands it. We have been told that God visited this anger and punishment upon Jesus, to satisfy his legal demands concerning tooth for tooth. "Jesus would pay for our crimes and God's justice would be satisfied." When we look at sections of scripture like the book of Romans, or the opening

chapters of Genesis, what do we see? Do we see a God of wrath, looking for a way to appease his wrath through the sacrifice of an innocent party? This is how we view these passages through the Western judicial spectrum. We see these passages as primarily to do with our individual justification. But passages like Romans and Genesis 1-3 aren't primarily concerned with our justification. They are about God's plan to renew the world through a new priesthood of believers. This isn't an angry God. This is a self-giving God, who calls us to follow him in the world.

If God demanded tooth for tooth, why did he tell us through Christ not to demand it? Aren't we to follow God? Why would he tell us to do something that he wouldn't do? The picture we get of God through Jesus in the Gospels is one who forgives freely. He doesn't require payment for sin. He simply says, "Your sins are forgiven you, rise and walk." "Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more." Just as Jesus freed the woman bound by Satan for 18 years, his whole ministry, death and resurrection was a mission to rescue, a release of captives from Satan, not from God.

Instead, we see a God who receives the prodigal son home without any compensation for wrong done. The historical record of sin isn't even considered, and isn't covered by sacrifice. God forgives freely and for that reason he tells us to do the same for our enemies. "Forgive those who sin against you. Love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you." So here, we don't see anger expressed at sinners. We see love that takes initiative to bless those who sin. It's not just a command to forgive, but a command to take action to serve. This is following God. This is what he does. This is who he is.

So, who demands satisfaction for the law? Does God? No. Then, who does? It was the Prodigal's brother in Jesus' parable. He wanted satisfaction for the wrong his brother had done. The father didn't care about that. It was the brother who used the law to accuse. So it was in the Old Testament. It was the accuser who demanded Israel's death through the law. And it was God who stepped in and took that death on their behalf, to deliver them from that law and from the legal justice that Satan required.

This is how we read the judicial parts of Romans; in the love of God. As Paul said in conclusion, "Who shall condemn us, it is God who justifies?" This is how Jesus viewed the cross: as a "ransom." A ransom is paid to the one who kidnaps people. Satan took custody of Israel by the law and God came in the flesh and paid the price and set them free. And he paid the price in our own satanic conscience. We accused ourselves, and on the cross we saw a God who forgave us.

"Just think how much more the blood of Christ will purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God. For by the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins." (Heb 9:24) Christ offered himself to God, which doesn't mean God's wrath required it, but that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament law, to set our conscience free to serve God. The cross is God's personal humiliation in Christ, to serve humanity, to set us free from ourselves, from Satan, from sin and death, not to save us from God. In renewing our hearts this way, God's plan is to renew the world with our new works. The cross is changed from an image of God punishing, to God serving, and this changes the image we reflect in the nations.

This is quite different from the common kind of judicial view of the cross. An angry Father didn't punish his innocent Son to satisfy his anger. Rather, God gave his life to save us from our sin and death, to open the grave of condemnation Satan held us in. This is an action of love, not an action demanded by anger.

Who demanded a tooth for a tooth in the Old Testament? The people did. Since Cain slew Abel, societies have demanded retributive justice. This is what Cain feared. So Cain's murder would be

punished by sevenfold retribution. This was how kingly justice was. If you sin against a poor person, then you pay a small sum. But if you sin against an important person you pay heavily. So God gave the law of “tooth for tooth” to limit human vengeance and control it. The law was meant to limit the damage we made upon society, to prevent conflict from tearing society apart. Jesus was right in saying that tooth for tooth was a necessary convention in fallen society, but not in his kingdom.

The law contained a glimpse into the heart of God, showing the things that would bring lasting peace. These included kindness towards the refugee, support towards the weak, the poor and the enemy. This revelation of God’s person in the law is summarized by concepts like Jubilee. This mercy was the message of Jesus. The Pharisees thought Jesus was throwing away the law, but Jesus was fulfilling the law. Jesus claimed that Jubilee, not retribution, was the central revelation of the nature of God and also the central part in his kingdom in renovating the world.

In the Old Testament, sacrifice was the human way of forgiving others. It involved compensation for legal justice. But Jesus taught us just to forgive from a renewed heart. The old heart didn’t just require sacrifice to forgive others, but also to forgive ourselves. We see this immediately with Adam and Eve, hiding from God behind the bush. Since then, mankind devised sacrifice to appease their conscience. Sacrifice had a lot of benefits. It could help my conscience; it could settle disputes; it could reconcile enemies. All of this has been answered by the cross. Jesus says to us that since he suffered and forgave us, can’t we forgive ourselves and be reconciled to others? Simple.

Jesus became our sacrifice, our scapegoat, in order to end our need of sacrifice. It wasn’t God’s anger that killed Jesus, but human anger and violence that did it. God’s willingness not to kill his enemies, but to forgive them from the cross, is what drove a nail right through the centre of our retributive hearts and religious systems. This would change for ever the way we viewed justice and conflict in our world, bringing in the kingdom of God to our relationships and nations. The New Testament speaks of Christ dying to heal our conscience from sin, demonstrating his love to a humanity in hiding. On the cross Jesus met the judicial demands of the satan without, of the satan within our conscience and of the satan within our relationship.

In 2nd Thessalonians 1, it seems that the concept of retributive justice is celebrated. I will speak of this passage in a subsequent chapter, but will introduce the passage into this book here. No doubt this enlivened the Christian armies in times past, when they proclaimed themselves instruments of God’s justice upon the nations. But how does this compare to Jesus himself, who from the cross breathed no retribution, but only reconciliation? Jesus also clearly rebuked his disciples for desiring retribution upon others, claiming that such wasn’t the Spirit of God. Is Jesus different to what Paul was proclaiming here?

I believe Paul was speaking according to the Jewish mindset. The scenario is similar to the scene in Job, where God himself is being tried for his unequal favour towards his people. Here, Paul proclaims that in the day when God’s works shall be on trial, it will be seen that his people truly reflected the salvation they professed, in patience, in suffering. At the same time, those who missed the kingdom of God, it will be seen, did so because of their own evil works, which brought destruction upon themselves. God is vindicated in saving some and handing others, who insist, over to their own retribution. Paul was alluding to the fall of Jerusalem in that century, but the overall point, in the Jewish mind, is the vindication of God before history, as we say.

There is no sense in which God delights in retributive justice. Rather, his will is that all be saved. He does not delight in any that perish. He does not delight in, nor call for, retribution. Rather, he calls for us to love those who do wrong and to serve them for their reconciliation. It’s when we remove

this satanic court, this Jewish backdrop, from Paul's writings, that we end up reading the letter to the Romans, and other such passages of Paul, as depicting God as the accuser and destroyer. This was not in Paul's mind. Paul saw Satan as the accuser, from whom God has reconciled us.

When it comes to a biblical discussion on justice, the justice that God is interested in is that which works through the lives of his people, the justice the Prophets of the Old Testament spoke of, the gospel of the kingdom Jesus brought about, that is, the good news being preached to the poor. It's not just a matter of us sharing with others, but a matter of us working in the world to bring about just systems that obliterate our carefully maintained personal advantage, and lift up those in need. It is what Mary said, bringing down the rich, and lifting up the poor. Not that we purpose just to bring ourselves down, but we use what we have to lift others up. This is the justice that is in the hearts of God's people, because it is in God's heart.

Sacrifice

Sacrifice on the school playground:

Once, when I was a small boy, we moved and my parents sent me to a new school. I found a friend I thought I would get along with, and soon we were sitting together on a bench eating lunch.

Then a large group of boys ran around the corner towards us. They picked my friend off the bench and beat him up, for having red hair. He was different to them. Then they went away satisfied. The “guilty” had been punished. They had restored “righteousness” to the community.

So I am eating on my own, and then suddenly, the same large group of boys came running around the corner, this time with the red hair boy at the front of the pack. He had worked out that to be in the pack was the safest place to be! Something had united them; a common enemy!

I looked around and only I was sitting there, so realized I was the next victim; because I was different. I was new. So I got up and fled with my lunch. Thank God I was faster than the whole pack and was able to eat my lunch somewhere else when I escaped.

This process of “restoring righteousness” to our community is in all of our hearts and in all of our cultures. We are usually unaware that we are doing this. It has been with mankind since the fall.

We assume that sacrifice began with God. We assume that it was initially God’s idea. There is no culture on earth that isn’t a sacrifice centred culture. Sacrifice permeates all our religions and much of our thinking. But if it began with God, let’s just think about what this might mean. It would mean that God was the first to kill. If God sacrificed animals in the Garden of Eden to cloth Adam and Eve, this means that God introduced killing into the world, or at least into the biblical narrative. It would also mean that God introduced the idea of killing the innocent to justify the guilty. This is what we call scapegoating. If God introduced sacrifice, it means that God introduced into our world the concept of scapegoating.

Scapegoating riddles our social makeup, even in modern times. There is a common practice in our communities of blaming the innocent, or weaker, parties for the ills of society. In fact, social fabric is built on this very practice. When societies disunite and start to break apart, they, sometimes led by politicians, sometimes just behaving automatically, pick out an individual or group of people and lay blame on them. This practice galvanises, unifies and strengthens society, against a common enemy, and this renewed unity reinvigorates social progress. In elections today, it’s called, “Making our nation great again.” This happens in all modern democracies. In the UK, its Europe and immigrants. In Australia, its boat people and Muslims. In America, its Mexico, Muslims and the Chinese. Christians are called to serve these people, not punish them in God’s name.

Without us even being aware, scapegoating is an age old practice that builds empire by killing the innocent for the empire’s sins. It’s the sins of the empire that cause empire to breakup, and it’s the scapegoating of the innocent that causes empire to re-unify. It’s a practice that works, whether on the school playground, or in the nations of the world.

There are long discussions about this in the Gospel of John. Satan is the author of killing. He was a murderer from the beginning. Jesus taught that scapegoating was not from God, but was demonic. This discussion arose because of the scapegoating religion of the Pharisees. They wanted to kill

Jesus, though they were not really aware of what they were doing. They turned their murderous action upon the woman caught in adultery. This would assuage their guilt and strengthen their body politic. Then they turned their scapegoating to the man who was born blind. The disciples once asked whether another man was born blind because of his sins, or the sins of his parents. This highlights the scapegoating attitudes that permeated their faith and culture. And it always focused on the weak and unfortunate in the society. Finally, they turned their scapegoating murderous attention to Jesus. "You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." Satan called for scapegoating, he is the author of it, not God.

Here is scapegoating at its heart: "It may not be just, but we do it to save the nation, to unify our 'playground friends.' It is politically expedient." Its satan's way of nation building, which is why all our nations are under his power, because we all follow this principle.

So think about this in the light of Jesus. Centre all our understanding about God around what Jesus showed us in his own life and teachings. Jesus perfectly revealed the Father. What Jesus said about scapegoating and the religion of his time shows who God is. Scapegoating, the killing of the innocent to save the guilty, which is the very cohesive agent of all human societies, though we are blind to it, cannot be authored by God. Its father is the devil. God does not kill.

The gospel is about two distinct kingdoms. One scapegoats the weak, the foreigner and the one different to us, just as the school playground does. The other kingdom serves the weak, the foreigner and the stranger, just as Isaiah envisioned.

Let's think about this again. Does God require blood? We picture God as either someone angry, who requires that blood must be shed to appease his wrath, or as someone who is a legalist, demanding that the letter of his law be satisfied by punishment. This just doesn't look like the God that Jesus represented when he came. Is God the god that says, "I demand to be appeased by blood. If not your blood, then the blood of an innocent victim will satisfy my demand." Did Jesus in any way portray a god like this? Or, does God care about the law in some legalistic sense, rather than about people? The Pharisees showed God cared about the law. Jesus showed he cared about people. The god the Pharisees served sounds a lot more like satan than like God.

The concept of appeasement introduces into our faith something very foreign to God's inner nature, as revealed by the gospel. It introduces the idea that God wants payment. It means that we must give God something, for his sake. This is one of the most corrupting influences to permeate religions. It means that if I give God something then he is happy. It means that I can go on sinning, or at least living in un-transformed ways, dominated by our former cultural logic, so long as I am covered by sacrifice.

This saturates our religions today. The main focus of faith is seen as something to cover our sin, rather than something that heals our relationship with neighbours and with our world. We don't change much. It produces a form of eye service in our faith. So long as I show I am appeasing someone, my private life doesn't really matter so much. This was the religion of the Pharisees, which they built on sacrifice.

Appeasement breeds corruption. It means that the gods can be bought. There is probably no single more damaging concept in human history than this. It breeds "big-man-ship." The guy at the top must be bought, he must be specially honoured, he must be served. This infiltrates leadership culture throughout our nations. Again, there is little, if anything, in our world more damaging than "big-man-ship." There is probably nothing that the gospel and life of Jesus was more opposed to.

The gospel shows a God who humbles himself, who condescends, who comes down, who serves the least. This is totally opposed to the idea of sacrifice. Jesus threw out upward-sacrifice and said our hearts and lives are to be totally remodelled, and our leadership structures are to be radically changed. Our attention, Jesus said, is to be downward, like God's attention, to healing the beggar, Lazarus.

The idea that God has blood lust pervades our reading of the whole Old Testament. It isn't what the Old Testament truly presents about God, but it is our reading of it, because that is how our cultures see God. We see blood lust in the Old Testament, because that is what our cultures were about. A correct reading of the Old Testament shows a God who is moving us, from what dominated our cultures, to a true picture of himself in Jesus. Our cultures made it so hard for us to see God. That's why he had to come in Christ. But even then, we argue with Christ. We still go back to building a religion on other things in the Bible, and interpreting them outside of what Christ showed us.

So who demands blood? Satan does. He stands over the law and demands retribution. He fills our hearts with vengeance and violence towards those who have broken the law. He fills our cultures and nations with this destruction. And it is we who demand blood lust. It is our conscience that invents sacrifice as a way of "appeasing an angry god."

Jesus came to get this out of our hearts, so that we stop looking at the world in this violent way. Violence began in the Garden of Eden when guilt entered our hearts and this guilt has ever since been manipulated and controlled by Satan, and the rest is terrible history. So when God comes in Christ, we don't recognize him. Sacrifice is from a god who demands and who is focused on himself. God is a God who doesn't demand, but who gives to others, and who calls us to follow him.

Here is a standard translation of Jeremiah 7:22, "For I did not speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices."

Commentators have struggled with this verse in different ways. Plainly put, Jeremiah said that God did not command Israel to offer sacrifices. This looks confusing and I guess it is supposed to, to make us think. At first sight, the law looks full of commands by God concerning how Israel is to offer sacrifices. Yet Jeremiah is not the only prophet to claim that God does not want sacrifice:

"Sacrifice and meal offerings you have not desired... Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required." (Psalm 40:6) "I shall take no young bull out of your house, nor male goats out of your folds. For every beast of the forest is mine. The cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird of the mountains, and everything that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you. For the world is mine, and all it contains. Shall I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of male goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving and pay your vows to the Highest; Call upon me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honour me." (Psalm 50:9-15)

This says it plainly. God doesn't need us to care for him; he cares for us. God said the same to David when David wanted to build God a temple. The Lord said, "I don't need a house from you, but I will build a house for you." This house in our family in Christ.

On and on the Prophets reveal God's will about sacrifice. "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." (Hosea 6:6) "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Should we offer him thousands of rams and ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Should we sacrifice our firstborn children to pay for our sins? No, O people, the Lord has told you

what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:6-8)

Why then did Jeremiah say that God did not command Israel concerning sacrifices when he called them out of Egypt? When we look at the Exodus, the law was not God’s initial desire, though he knew the law would follow. He wanted a people of faith and love, just like he wanted in his first creation of Adam and Eve.

But satan entered their hearts, the same way he entered Adam and Eve’s hearts. He told them that God didn’t have their best interest at heart, that God would forsake them in the wilderness and they should not trust him. They believed and obeyed satan and this made satan their lord, meaning he had right of prosecution over Israel. So God gave them the law, partly to reveal his good intentions through Jubilee, and partly to regulate satan’s claims in their consciences through sacrifice. This is what Israel chose, not God.

What I mean by this is that the cross of Christ takes away the retribution that we require by the law. And it works like this: if someone has wronged me, my response, my satanically motivated response, is to demand retribution, which is what I call “justice”, from my fallen perspective. Now, if God came in Christ and suffered injustice at the hands of man, far worse injustice than I suffered, and he forgave those who did it to him, then can't God say to me, "Forgive, as I have forgiven?" So the cross takes away legal retribution from our hearts.

The problem with sin is not that God can't forgive it, but that we can't. We struggle to forgive ourselves and others. This is what God warned us of in the Garden. Sin produces hurt, anger, all sorts of negative, alienating syndromes, ultimately violence and destruction (which we call justice) on a wide scale. It's not that God is harsh about our sin, but he knows how harsh we are about it. We think retributive justice; Jesus gives restorative justice.

This is why it is said of Jesus, "The Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world." He bore the sin that was committed against him, carried it away and absorbed it, forgiving it, taking it out of the cycle of hurt and violence, taking away the enmity, the retribution, producing reconciliation in its place: reconciliation in our own conscience towards God, and reconciliation of people towards each other. And he calls us, as his people, to do the same with the sin of world. Follow him. This is Christianity.

When societies choose to live by the law, instead of accepting God’s grace, then by the law they demand retribution to settle disputes, to purge wrong. If this isn't appeased, then vengeance and destruction on a large scale will take place. This is justice, as fallen men see it.

The relationship between satan working in human hearts, and God acting to save his creation, is throughout the scriptures. The names for satan, meaning accuser and destroyer, reveal what is going on in the background to this salvation history. Scenes like satan accusing God for blessing Job, and satan then gaining access to destroy Job’s life, show what was going on in the background of Israel’s destruction in the Wilderness.

This is why Paul identifies satan as the destroyer, or taker of life in the Wilderness. (1 Cor 10:10) Many more texts in the scripture identify satan as the destroyer, who is contained by sacrifice (compare 1 Chron 21 with 2 Sam 24, and see Zechariah 3). Satan is counsel for the prosecution, or the devil’s advocate, whom God eventually keeps at bay, legally and justly satisfies, by the offering of his own life in Christ. God doesn’t demand sacrifice, just as the Prophets say; he rather gives it for us.

The same is shown to us through the life of Moses. In Exodus 4:24, "The Lord met Moses and was about to kill him." The Septuagint translates this "the messenger of the Lord." This may not be an exact word for word translation, but the Septuagint often wasn't. It provides the translation from the sense of it in the Hebrew mind. A "messenger from the Lord," means one approved by God in the legal sense. We see this often in the Old Testament. It is satan, or one of his messengers, having God's just approval due to human sin. See also 1 Kings 22:22.

In the Passover in Egypt, God is not the destroying angel; satan is. God does not demand blood; satan does. God gives himself in death to fulfil the law, that he might legally redeem us from satan. This meaning of the Passover is shown in Isaiah 31. Here, God says he will Passover Jerusalem, like a hen passes over its chicks, to shield them from the destroyer; the Assyrian army. It is a messianic prophecy that depicts the cross. On the cross, God passed over us, meaning he stepped in between us and the satan to shield us from his rage and destruction.

This is what Jesus did with the woman caught in adultery. He stepped between the woman and the legal demands of the Pharisees against her. They were the satan. When Jesus passed-over the woman, the Pharisees turned their hatred to him instead. This always happens when we seek to protect a scapegoat from aggressors. If you stand for those whom society or the religion is against, the society will reject you, because it doesn't want that light about themselves to shine.

This shows exactly what Jesus did for us all on the cross. He passed-over us. He took the rage of the Pharisees, the accusers of the law, against us all. This accusation of satan operates in our society, in our relationships, and in our own hearts. Jesus took this accusation into himself, and then nailed it to the cross, by forgiving it all. He left it on the cross. He rose without carrying a single grudge of the law. This is what Passover means; to pass between the ransomed and the destroyer. This is what Jesus did on the cross.

This is what God wants us to do for each other, even for those who hate us. He wants us to stand between the weak and their accusers, rather than to become their accusers, even if it hurts us, and even if they don't deserve it.

When God suffered in Christ, at the accuser's hands, through us, God freely forgave us. This also calls each one of us to forgive the demands we hold against ourselves and against each other. If God can forgive, so can we. If God forgave us, then we are called to forgive. God forgave us freely, without payment to himself, and he asks us to do the same for others. This has defeated the satan, the accuser, which ruled our hearts and our retributive responses in society.

The cross answers satan's legal hold on our souls. In his sufferings, God became a victim of our sin against others, against the innocent and against our scapegoats. If God can forgive the sin we committed against him, then he can also forgive the same sins we have committed against each other. Forgiving us for our sins against God, and for our sins against our neighbours, is forgiving us for the whole law. These two commandments are the whole law. To God, the law isn't about the technical issues of ritualism, but about the suffering we cause to others. Forgiveness of our sin against the law becomes God's right through the incarnation. He can forgive, because he has human scars.

God had to suffer to be in a just position to forgive. This is the atonement. And it doesn't come by God punishing an innocent victim; that is the view of man and that is human religion at its core. Rather, the atonement comes by God freely taking that punishment from a violent humanity upon himself, and then freely forgiving it. Now the atonement makes sense against Jesus' teachings. "It has been said 'eye for eye', but I say to you, if someone smites you on one cheek, offer to him the

other." He debunked legal repayment. He eradicated eye for eye. He said God doesn't think that way. To God, sin isn't paid for, it is forgiven freely. This is what Jesus taught and this is what he said we should follow.

What else did Jeremiah mean by saying that God didn't command Israel concerning sacrifices when they came out of Egypt? I believe that what he meant, was that sacrifice wasn't God's idea. He didn't invent it. It originated with human culture, because of the human consciousness of the need for retribution. God "went with the flow," so to speak. He used what he found in human culture and worked that towards his salvation plan. In other words, God entered into our cultural practices and transformed them, eventually bringing us out of them and into his view. That is, God eventually eradicated sacrifice through Christ. He completely transformed the meaning of sacrifice, taking it away from blood, and into an entirely new godly perspective.

The crucial point to make here is that all these kinds of practices we see in the Old Testament, the ones that God gets bad press about, aren't actually from God. They didn't start with him. I mean the accusations about God requiring blood, requiring the death of innocents, and having a fixation about legal repayment. God's way, in scripture, has been to meet us where we are, with our fallen ideas and practices, and then move us to where he is.

We see glimpses of this movement towards God's true nature in the Old Testament, but it isn't until we see Jesus in the Gospels, that the light shines more brightly on God's full character. We will speak about this more in the next chapter, but the point is that God is acting missiologically in the Old Testament. This means, he enters into our culture as he finds it, and uses the culture as a vehicle to reveal who he is and then transforms that culture into his kingdom ideas.

So let's see how God does this with sacrifice. Firstly, we have read so much back into the Genesis text. It doesn't say that God killed animals to cloth Adam and Eve. It doesn't say that Abel killed a lamb. It says he gave a "present offering," the choicest part of his flock. There is no mention here of death. The words "burnt offering" are not used until Noah, when God allowed mankind to eat meat. When Noah offered a burnt offering, it says, "The Lord smelled the soothing aroma; and the Lord said to Himself, "I will never again curse the ground (destroy the world) on account of man..." (Gen 8:21)

This looks strange at first sight. Noah offers God a sacrifice of burnt animal flesh and the smell is soothing to God. Does God delight in the death of the animal? Does he like the smell of cooked meat? Or does the smell of sacrifice sooth his anger? Does he require gifts of sacrifice from men? We may say that this points to the sacrifice of Christ. But even then, the same questions remain. Does seeing the death of Christ soothe God? If there is anything about the death of Christ that soothes God, it is a man overcoming sin, by not repaying evil for evil. It isn't the anger of God that is soothed by his death.

Noah was carrying out a cultural practice of giving something to God as an act of worship. And God accepted it. He accepted it because it was a token of Noah's faith. All of us have practices that aren't from God, but we do them because we believe they are honouring to God, and God accepts them because he accepts us. He accepts our heart; he sees our faith. But that doesn't mean he prescribed these practices. He just looks past our ignorance on so many counts. In this case, God accepted Noah's act because he accepted Noah and was in relationship with him. This doesn't make God a God of bloodlust. It shows God loving and condescending, like we see him on the cross.

How do we know this was God's attitude towards the sacrifice? We know this because of what God did with sacrifice in Christ and in the New Covenant. We know this because of the way God transformed this old practice and did away with it, at his first opportunity, in the gospel.

Throughout the Old Testament, God met people where they were, especially with the sacrifice rituals, and he used the practices and filled them with new meaning, which no one understood until Christ came. He used these practices, because this is the way people understood God, and God had to communicate with them on their own level. It's a slow process of communication and of God's self-revelation, but the only one that can work, on a voluntary basis of love, where humans are hard in understanding.

An example of God communicating with us on our human level, is seen with Abraham. Abraham asked God how he would know that God would keep his promise concerning giving him a son. God told him to prepare sacrifices, cut them down the middle and lay them out on the ground. This was the usual practice in those days for making a covenant, the strongest possible pledge. Today we use lawyers and contracts for the same thing. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ eradicated all off this, saying our 'yes' or 'no' is enough. Here, Abraham was questioning God's integrity and God wasn't angry about that. Instead, God spoke with Abraham in a way that he would understand, in his given culture, to give Abraham strong assurance. God's word wasn't enough for Abraham, so God condescended and added an oath. Here is real condescension. This is the point. The Old Testament is filled with God condescending to man, to lead us to Christ.

Another example, is the elaborate ritual of the Day of Atonement. God completely transformed the meaning of sacrifice through this ritual. The way the High Priest was instructed to carry out the sacrifice, shows us that the animal he was killing was actually, in type, God himself. In this ritual of atonement, God wasn't demanding, or even receiving, anything from man. The animal belonged to God and was given to man. God was the sacrifice, giving himself for man.

This was a radical transformation in human sacrificial ideas. People weren't giving anything to placate an angry God, but God was giving himself to rescue us from satan, sin, the law and death. No other cultural ritual had done this. Man had never seen God in his true light, or seen God's true view of sacrifice before. Never had a culture put the deity on the self-giving end of sacrifice, rather than on the receiving end. The atonement wasn't something given to an angry God. It was a loving God on a rescue mission. This transforms our whole view of the cross.

This relates to the temple concept, which we will look at later. David thought he was building a temple for God. All the cultures did this. They all gave things to god, to honour him and make him happy. David brought this into Israel's worship, and it expressly did not please God, although he allowed it, or accommodated it. God didn't ask man to build a temple for him, but God was coming to build a new home for man. Christ would show us what honoured and pleased God: our love for neighbour.

When we see Christ, what is the soothing aroma that pleases God? Is it violence, death and blood? No. This is the soothing aroma to satan, and to angry, violent, humanity, but never to God. "Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God." (Eph 5:2) Texts like this have been so badly misread, again because we use our own cultural perspective. The soothing aroma to God is love. This has transformed our whole view of sacrifice. Man took Christ and killed him. Christ's offering to God was his non-retaliatory love, this demonstration of the nature of God's love before the whole world. This love

was the pleasing aroma, which we are to follow, not by giving God anything, only our love for each other.

This is how God has taken the concept of sacrifice, utterly transformed it, and filled it with new meaning. It isn't killing, but giving life to those in need. It isn't anger, but love. On the cross Christ put an end to human systems of sacrifice and gave us love in their place. Christ did what the Prophets foretold about sacrifice.

When beaten, he didn't beat again. When reviled, he didn't revile in return. He endured temptation and overcame darkness. He passed through all the anger of man and in return he loved and forgave. This was pleasing to God; that Christ lived as man was intended to live, when darkness threw all it had at him. Sacrifice, as a payment to God, or as an act of worship, was never God's intention.

God entered into our human systems of sacrifice, when the Pharisees and Sadducees offered Christ as a scapegoat to save Jerusalem, and this is where he totally defeated sacrifice in our minds and hearts. He became the Trojan Horse. When we killed him, as our sacrifice, as our scapegoat, in our religious anger, he put an end to the whole satanic system of death and brought eternal life out of it instead.

Our only sacrifice is love: "No greater love has any man than this, that he lay down his life his friend." This isn't speaking about going to war. Jesus didn't kill anyone in war to save us. It is speaking about putting our self in the way of danger, to save a life. This is what God did for us, to set us free from satan. This is what we do for one another today, as we serve even our enemies.

This is sacrifice: "I appeal to you therefore, 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..."

"Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

"Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom 12:12...9-21)

The burning coals is love, poured onto the consciences of others. This is the pleasing aroma to God.

Man invented sacrifice and God ended it. It started with Cain killing Abel, and then Cain's death being revenged seven-fold. So killing and then more killing in righteous retribution began. God took scapegoating and sacrifice and bottled it. First, he took human sacrifice out of it, including child sacrifice. Then he reduced it to just one eye for an eye, not indiscriminate revenge. Then he allowed animal or financial payment in lieu of the death penalty. All of this was to placate man's hard heart. Then he took away the scapegoat altogether and put himself in its place. Instead of receiving the scapegoat, as in all religion, he gave himself as the scapegoat, to settle all our accusations about

ourselves and about others. Finally, in Christ he defeated sacrifice altogether, by transferring the principle into service and love, which is what Christ did for us and what he taught us to do for others.

Who is God in the Old Testament?

Every aspect of the kingdom of God is missiological. The gospel is about one new kingdom coming to permeate and renew old kingdoms of death. The gospel is about ambassadors, being sent into foreign kingdoms, as representatives of a new kingdom that is coming to rule. This is how Jesus came in the incarnation and this is how he sent, us as his church, into the world. It isn't that we are taking people out of this world to heaven. That isn't the purpose of the gospel. It is that the kingdom is coming to every worldly culture, to implant in it a new King, to transform the whole culture, humanity and creation.

A leading principle, in this type of missions, is finding a communicational starting point in the culture we are reaching. We find something in that culture that the people understand and then start using that as a basis, or beginning point, for sharing something new. This is what we find in the Old Testament.

In so many ways, God was communicating with us on the basis of our present cultures and understanding, wanting to draw us on to a new understanding, to lift our eyes from our ways to his way. This type of missions is a necessity. You have to start where people are, if they are going to understand anything at all. So God did this in the Old Testament, to slowly move us to the place he wants us to see and understand. But we didn't get it still. This is why Jesus and his life and teachings came as such a shock. We couldn't perceive what God was saying to us in the Old Testament, though his Prophets spelt it out. We became stuck in our views and interpreted God that way.

Some people call this communication method anthropomorphism. This means "attributing human characteristics and purposes to inanimate objects, animals, plants, or other natural phenomena, or to God." God takes on human characteristics in order to communicate with us, and to transform our human understanding. We need to remember; the reason God did this was always transformation. He used human traditions, to turn their meaning upside down.

We see anthropomorphisms at their most basic level in statements like "the arm of the Lord is not short that it cannot save." He speaks of having ears, eyes, feet, and otherwise presents himself in human ways. God is taking on human characteristics to communicate with us. In another text, in Isaiah, he presents himself as a human army general, putting on armour for battle, but he then transforms this armour into the fruit of the Spirit. This is how God fights, unlike us. God always does this with battle language, showing that the way he wins is different to us.

He speaks of having wrath, but again, in Christ, he transoms this wrath into compassion and suffering for the lost. In so many ways God presents himself in human emotions or characteristics, and then transforms them to show a new approach to human lostness. Jesus wasn't angry with the woman caught in adultery, and no one could understand why. "Wasn't he angry with this in the law?" Is his wrath really his care for us?

"In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you." Is God angry like a man? No, he isn't. But how else are we going to understand him? His anger is compassion, pleading, suffering for our wellbeing, if by any means we will hear him. In no other way does he lift his hand against us.

This missiological form of communication fills the Old Testament. It is a prime way in which God communicates with us until Jesus comes. It is vital to understand this when reading the Old Testament. So many of the things presented there are not from God, but they are starting points, within our own fallen human cultures, that God is connecting with, in order to show us something

new. If we don't understand this, then when we read the Old Testament we will think that God is like the human traditions he uses to speak us. God is nothing like them at all and we see this when Jesus fills and transforms these Old Testament traditions.

God is not at all like any of our fallen cultures, even our main cultures today. The whole point of God coming towards us, slowly in the Old Testament, and then in Christ, is to take us out of where we are, to transform us into his image. But seeing his real image first is the key. How can we see it, when we always look at God in our own mirrors? We saw him using our cultures, but we didn't see how he was transforming them. Only some of the Prophets had a glimpse. This is why the people did not know Jesus when he came. They thought he would be like us, but he wasn't.

This constantly shocked the Pharisees. They spoke to Jesus about their legal right to divorce, written into the Old Testament law. "This was given because of the hardness of your hearts," Jesus answered. Why not rather forgive, as God does? So, the law of God wasn't his will? It wasn't truly from God, in that sense? It was an allowance for human nature? Yes, the law was God meeting man where man was, in so far as God was able to communicate with him, given the state of his heart?

This communication with man wasn't an easy task for God. Think about how different his character is to fallen human nature and culture? Remember what God did with his unfaithful wife, poetically in Hosea? He took her back from prostitution to himself. That unfaithful wife was all of us. How different this is to human hardness. How could God possibly start in communication to redeem and change us? What is there in our cultures and understanding that he could use to portray to us what he is really like? There is nothing in our cultures like him. Even our love is marred. How could we possibly understand even the smallest thing about him? He is so different to us.

The Old Testament is full of symbols that God uses to start this communication with us. This is only the start. What follows, is a long process of transforming these symbols, to reflect God's nature. This is finally achieved on the cross. A classic Old Testament symbol is God sitting on a throne. Do you really think that God sits on a literal throne? Doesn't the idea of a throne rather communicate something else instead?

Some people think that God has an ego problem and needs thrones and worship from his subjects. This is how all the gods of idolatry behaved. This is how humans constructed their own gods, because this is what people are like. They then transposed these same ideas onto the true God, who was nothing at all like this. He was so far from this, that our corruption could not possibly even glimpse him.

The symbol of the throne communicated the truth that the earth belongs to God. It showed us that no enemy could finally displace us. It showed us that God rules and that though we are persecuted, we should have heart and encouragement, because goodness shall cover the earth and the ways of wicked shall not prosper. The throne symbol was a threat to the wicked, who sat on thrones, and used those thrones to oppress people. This is what the throne concept communicated.

And we understand this because we invented the throne to oppress others. God didn't invent it. He has no need for a throne. God simply used this symbol so we would understand him. It was men that built thrones to elevate themselves above other men and lord it over them. It was men who had the ego and power issues. This is where thrones came from. They didn't come from heaven, but from oppression.

Kings are the worst idea that men ever invented, but God even uses this symbol of "King" to describe his reign. But his reign is so different from ours, that we misunderstand what is meant

when God uses the word “King”, unless we listen to Jesus and what he taught about it. Israel chose a king and this wasn’t the will of God for them. God didn’t want them abused by a king. Kings have been one of the worst ideas of mankind in our history.

So how did Jesus describe his throne? John and James heard about this throne, and came and asked if they could sit with Jesus on smaller thrones. He said, “Do you know what you are asking.” And they answered, “O yes, we know what throne means. We think it sounds good, something to be desired.” Jesus answered, “Are you sure you understand what God is communicating by using this symbol of rulership? Do you know how God rules? Are you able to drink of the cup I am going to drink, to serve the sheep?” That should have shut them up, but it didn’t.

Jesus called his disciples and said that in the world, people rule over other people, but in his kingdom it shall not be like that. In his kingdom, those who serve the lowest shall rule. We are to rule from under people, lifting them. So in his kingdom, rule means servanthood. This is a glimpse of what God means by throne and kingdom. It’s completely opposite to our human view. When God uses the symbol of throne, he completely transforms its meaning, and we should remember this also when reading about him in the book of Revelation.

Then in Matthew 25, Jesus spoke about what it would be like at his ascension, when he ascended to heaven and sat on his throne to rule. What would that throne, rule and kingdom look like? It would be like this: “I was hungry and you fed me, I was naked and you clothed me...” Jesus is with the hungry and naked. It’s not the place where you normally find a king, but this is where he is. This is his throne, among the poor. “Throne” is a symbol of how God rules, and in Christ we see what this means. God rules through service. He overcomes evil with good, and this type of rule shall fill his universe.

A classic symbol is that of a lion. Men decided that a lion should represent conquest. So God calls himself the lion of Judah. A lion prevails and conquers his enemies. But in Christ, we see how God does this. John heard a voice behind him saying, “The Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed.” And John turned around to look at this lion and he saw a lamb, as though it had been slain. (Rev 5:5-6) So this is how the lion conquers, as a lamb. This is what John is communicating to us about who God is, so we can be transformed and begin to rule like he does. This is what the Revelation was written for. If he conquered with force, he would be like his enemy. But he overcame evil by sticking with good. This is how we conquer, not by might, but by service.

It is vital that we understand these symbols, because these symbols are always transformed by the gospel of Christ. This is the point of the symbols. God starts with our ways, customs and cultures, and then he fills them with Christ and transforms them entirely. This is how he gets our attention, and then he transforms us. If we don’t see these symbols as pointing to something better in Christ, then we misread the Bible. If we take the symbols as men understand them, and then use them to depict God, we get God so wrong. We then make God in our image. But if we allow God to take our symbols and fill them with the true revelation of himself, with newness of meaning, then he makes us in his image. This is so vital to grasp.

The temple is another symbol. God took this from man and completely changed its meaning. This is another reason why the people could not receive Jesus. Creation starts with a temple, in Eden. But this is an open temple, with no hindrance between God and his natural and human creation. God’s plan, and this is the goal of the gospel, is that the whole earth be filled with his personal presence. The whole of creation is his temple.

But man changed that. They put their gods in buildings and shut them up from the general people. Then priests ruled over the people, giving them special conditions of entry, which they had to pay for. Religion was part of the economy. In the law, God adopted this human system, that was already prevalent all through the world at Moses' time, and which all men followed in their minds, and then once again, in the gospel, he completely changed it.

He opened up the temple, tore down the separating curtain. In Christ he came out of his holy place and visited sinners in their homes and ate and drank with them. He made access to himself free of charge, for all people, of all races and levels in society, and took his faith completely out of the hands of the special classes of rulers and priests. He gave himself freely to all people, without exception.

This was intolerable to the leaders, who profited greatly from the former arrangements: "This must be persecuted," they said, "It must be stopped." But in Jesus, we see who God really is. We see the temple that God really designed and built through the lives of his people. He didn't build a hierarchy of male priests, with loads of special rules. Men built that. God used that to point to Christ, so that Christ could come and change it to be what he wanted. He built an open plan family of "neither male, nor female, neither bond nor free, neither Jew nor Greek."

It is the same with sacrifice. He took sacrifice as he met it in our societies and he filled it with new meaning. He filled it once again with service. Instead of gods taking from the people, it is God giving to us. Instead of God demanding death, it is God giving life to the violent and criminal. Instead of death, his sacrifice is a living sacrifice, of love between us. All these things have been transformed at the appearance of God in the gospel.

These are some of the things in the Old Testament that people blame God for. They say he is a God of blood, of sacrifice, of the priesthood, the temple and its restrictive rituals, of the ego centred throne, of the angry wrath, or patriarchy. All these are human violence and exploitation of others. We could go on and on, and maybe in some later chapters we will raise other things, like our human governments, our armies, wars, and even the law. None of these things were invented by God, nor were they in any way of God. These things don't reflect on the character of God. They all reflect on the character of man. We can't blame God for them or point the finger at him. We invented them to oppress our fellow man. That is where they all came from.

Instead, we must see the truth about this. God took all these things and used them to reach us, to unfold who he is. This is what Jesus did in his ministry. He took each one of these symbols, or human traditions, and he opened them up and took out the violence of man, and put in the nature of God. This is Jesus. It's time we paid attention to what he taught us in Jesus, and renewed our human values, and stopped seeing God through our human eyes.

The law, for example, was made by man after the fall. There is no record of God introducing it. Before Moses, civilizations already had complex law codes, not as merciful, or as equitable, as the Moses code. But law had been developed long before Moses. After the fall, the law was needed to regulate man's actions against man. Before the fall, this wasn't necessary. Man lived in relationship with those around him. Adam and Eve were conscious of each other, of God and of the creation they were part of. These were in harmony, so law wasn't needed. Our human identity was seen in the context of these relationships with others.

An African friend told me a story of a man who placed prizes on the ground and made children run towards them. The winner would receive all the goods. But the children ran hand in hand, won together, and shared the prizes. When the man asked why, one of them explained that they had been taught by their family that, "I am because of you." Compare this with the climax of Western

philosophy, by René Descartes, “I think, therefore I am.” The central feature of human reality had become our self, not our relationships with others. This is what happened in the fall.

This Western view of reality is still present in much of our theology. It is orientated towards the individual, not to the ecclesia, the church and to the wider community. This is still “fallen theology.” The fall was when man began to focus on himself. He became predominately self-aware, rather than his previous primary orientation to relationships. At the fall, he thinks of himself only. After that, his actions were no longer in the common interest, so society developed laws to govern his actions.

The law is not celebrated in scripture, but it is called the minister of death. Because of the fall, because of self-centredness, the law becomes a weapon. It is a weapon against our own conscience, and a weapon we use against each other. It is the weapon of death that we need desperately to be set free from, to be delivered from the accusations that hurl around in our minds and societies.

So God starts with the law when he calls Israel, because this is what men lived by. He then worked to set me free from this law. First, he moderated the law, to make it less harsh. Then he used the ritual aspects of law, already in human society, which alleviated the human conscience, thus reducing levels of guilt in the community. But he transformed these rituals, steering them away from human brutality, away from idolatry, and turned them into a symbol of love rather than of recompense. When Jesus came, he showed what the law pointed to. It pointed to love for our neighbour.

Jesus then introduced the “new commandment.” He used the commandment language, the disciples were used to, but actually steered them away from the commandments of the Old Testament laws. This is what Jesus was doing all through his ministry. They couldn’t heal on the Sabbath, because of the law. They couldn’t visit sinners, because of the law. They couldn’t help the man on the road to Jericho, because of the law. They couldn’t love their enemies, because of the law. The people constantly put the law in the way of love. They used it instead, to accuse each other and to destroy. Jesus said, drop all those commandments and turn to a selfless orientation in relations with others. He said, since God has forgiven you and made you friends, the law is no longer needed. Therefore, forgive each other.

Then Jesus used his life as the model of the new community. He loved his disciples to the end, shedding his blood to save them. This is the new law, to drop the old law, by which we accuse each other, and take up a new way of living instead, which is focused on forgiveness, service and love, to the point of losing our own lives for others. This new orientation on serving the other, frees our whole community from the law, from the accuser, working in our minds and society.

The communion is an example of this. We share our lives together, as the bread is shared. We give our blood for each other, as Jesus gave his for us. The “new law” of Jesus is to drop the law, that we used to kill, and instead live by love, and not by commandments. It’s like Jesus saying, “You guys like commandments, so I’m now giving you one you don’t expect: ‘Drop the commandments and replace them with relationship love. Take away the law that the Pharisees, rulers, and the violent Zealots use to hurt others. Don’t live by law anymore.’” Jesus is using missional language, starting with what we knew, the law we cherished, and using that language to introduce us to an entirely new way of life. This renews us together as one family. The whole purpose of God is liberation, to set us free from what destroys.

The letter to the Romans was written this way. It shows how God used our retributive thinking. He found that thinking in Israel and used it to make a law based covenant with them. Israel was not able to keep that covenant. The gospel, is God entering into that covenant, and therefore into our retributive mindset behind the covenant, and saving us from it. It’s another Trojan Horse idea. He

builds a salvation plan around the thing that makes us captive, and then he climbs into the middle of it, into our very heart, and pulls us out of that captivity to set us free. It cost God the cross to free us from the law that sin brought us into. He sets us free from the anger of the law and leaves us only with his love, to share with others, by giving our lives.

Man invented the law, and God got rid of it.

The Wrath of God

What happened in the Garden is similar to what happens in many families today. A child comes of age and decides to go his or her own way. He believes that the parents don't have his best interests at heart. There are various degrees in which this happens, and it is often one of the most saddening experiences a parent can go through. This happened with God and he had to let it happen, because if he stood in the way, then the person would never learn for himself the knowledge of the truth.

This is where the "devil's advocate" steps into the Garden, or into our lives, and says, "Your creator doesn't love you." His aim is to separate the creation from the creator, so he can then fill our heads with further destructive ways.

Once this happens, the next step is for guilt to set in. The person becomes conscious of the self-centred decisions he has made, and of his disloyalty to his creator, and therefore becomes ashamed. This results in a rift formed in their previous close relationship. This rift doesn't come from God's side, but from man's. As in the Garden, man hears God coming and hides behind the bush. It is from behind the bush, in his guilt and fear, that man now views God. He sees God as angry, condemning and punishing, because this is what he feels he deserves. This view of God isn't a true view, but is a reflection upon God that comes from our own view of ourselves.

This guilt becomes one of the most destructive forces in human existence and history. It becomes a place of captivity for humankind. Man must find a way out of it. One way is to hide from God and try to make it on our own knowledge. Another way is to blame others, to transfer the guilt onto those around us. We see this immediately, with Adam and Eve's response, as it is said, "Adam blamed the woman, the woman blamed the serpent, and the serpent didn't have a leg to stand on."

Guilt becomes one of the main sources of violence in our fallen world. It results in constant bloodshed. Seeing sin in others and cleansing that sin through punishment of the others, is a very good way of satiating our own conscience and also the conscience of our wider communities. This guilt, the accusing voice, has become the satan of our societies, working his destructive plans through the world.

We have built whole religious systems of this guilt. It is the source of our sacrificing and scapegoating practices, not only to appease our own consciences, but also to appease offence in our communities. It is the basis of the law of Moses, to limit and appease this wrath that works within us. It is wrath at self, which we transfer and pass on to each other. This sacrificial/law based culture is truly a satanically inspired culture.

But this law is what we chose. We use it to try to balance our books with God. But we fall short of it. And so the law keeps on working wrath in us, God says (Romans 4-5, and he was speaking there about our conscience), and as we transfer our guilt to others, the law continues to work wrath throughout our societies.

The surprise of the gospel is that the offence is ours. God isn't offended. That's why he came out of the separated holy place we put him, and why he came to us in incarnation and visited us in our homes, and forgave and healed us on our streets and died for us: to show us he isn't offended and he welcomes us back home.

This trick is, how can God redeem man in such a place. When the accuser lives inside their conscience, separating them from the God who loves them, how can God bring them back, and

restore that relationship? He can't do it by force, because this would play into the hands of the accuser as unjust. He has to let the accuser have his day and defeat him on his own turf.

This is the cross. God comes into our accusing satanic culture and becomes the victim of that accusation himself, suffers and dies. It's a master stroke. Self-giving is always the only way to expose an accuser. In dying, God proves his love for us and sets our conscience free from guilt and delivers satan out of our hearts. This is of course if we want this reconciliation. By the cross, we know we are forgiven and loved by God and this is the path for us to return on, for the healing and restoration in every part of lives. But those who don't want that and prefer the selfishness and destruction of their own way, are free to continue on that path.

And all this shows how we misread the Genesis narrative. We see God from behind the bush, seeing him as angry and vengeful. We see the curse narrated in Genesis 3 as a list of punishments for our disloyalty to God. But all the while God just wants what is best for us, despite the accusations to the contrary. A person said recently, "I am sorry that I broke God's rule and upset him." The thing for each of us to see, is that God just wants what is good for us. He is out for us, for our futures, for our wellbeing. He is not out to give us rules.

Have you ever listened to an audio Bible? I heard one with an angry voice. God came into the Garden, and angrily demanded. "Adam, where are you? Who told you that you were naked? Now I am going to do this, this and this to you!" This is a voice angry at the sin and ready to punish it. It's a voice of someone thinking of them self and how they have been wronged.

But then I threw that audio Bible out and got another one with a different voice. The text was the same, but the meaning was very different. Now the voice was that of a parent. The voice was that of one deeply concerned for the wellbeing of his creation, and ready to lay down his life to get that creation restored; not just restored, but even lifted higher than before. It's the voice of the father of the prodigal son. But we would be deaf to that voice and would not hear that voice until Jesus would come, who demanded no sacrifice and who had no wrath.

This is one of the ways wrath works in the Old Testament. Throughout the Old Testament, we think we see an angry God who must visit his punishment upon someone. Jesus came to show us the true God, and no one recognized him. The Pharisees preached the first god, and Jesus said concerning the true God that they had neither known him, nor seen him, at any time.

God is constantly on trial before the cosmic courts. The actual description of these courts is hard to pin down. The members of these courts are called principalities and powers, or the sons of God. This often means the high opinions of mankind. Today, we call it being judged by history. God's justice is always being scrutinized by the opinions of man, whether or not these opinions are being motivated by satan.

The principle critique is whether God is being fair. Is he showing favouritism? This was the trial God was under in the book of Job. It was said, by the sons of God, that Job only "loved" God because God blessed him. If this blessing was removed, Job would "curse God to his face." The allegation was that God didn't really have any true followers; that God had no righteous business in the affairs of men, to save any, or to save the world; that God had no right of protection over any people, because there was no love in the world – hatred ruled the day and God had no right in preventing this hatred from overflowing into Job's household and destroying him. "God must let down his hedge of protection over Job, if God was just."

In the book of Zechariah 3, it was this same allegation that came against God, in regard to Joshua the High Priest of Israel. Israel were returning, in part, from their captivity in Babylon, and Satan was challenging the legitimacy of this return. "Israel had broken their covenant with God... God had no right to show them favour and return them to their land." God debunked this satanic, accusative claim. He said that he had taken upon himself the sufferings of his covenant with Israel, and therefore he would show kindness to whom he wanted. But as for justice, Israel would not be treated with favouritism. Judgement would still come to their house, just as to any other nation.

This is how the discussion on justification begins in the book of Romans. In chapter 3, the accuser begins: "God is unjust for judging Israel, if their sin glorifies him." And conversely, "God cannot justly judge the world if he doesn't judge Israel, but shows them favouritism." This is how Paul's discussion on justification is launched. It is a defence of God. God hasn't overridden the punishment, or wrath, of the law, but instead he has taken it upon himself, on the behalf of his people, those who believe.

This isn't unjust, because the process still requires repentance. The people who believe show the fruits of that faith, like Job did. Our lives vindicate God at the cosmic courts. God forgives us for past sin, but our transformed lives show God hasn't bypassed the law, but rather fulfilled its just requirements, through our new kingdom of God orientated lives. In the end, Satan is without one plea.

This is how the discussion concluded in Romans 8, after it has been seen that God has justified us and also the Spirit has glorified us, meaning he has renewed our righteous walk in the world: "Who shall lay any charge against God's people? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns (where is the accuser now?). It is Christ who died and is now even raised, and is at the right hand of God standing on our behalf."

So the text shows us that the "wrath of God", Paul is speaking about in Romans, is one where God is laying down his life for those accused. He is then working in our hearts by grace to restore a righteous living. So whether it's the law, or whether it's the lifestyle of believers, that God is being accused over, he is found to be just. Satan is the accuser Jesus saved us from. The cross is not saving us from God. God is the justifier.

Let's carry this discussion on through another passage of Paul, in Thessalonians. I mentioned this passage in an earlier chapter, but here I want to look at the language used in Hebrew culture, when Paul speaks on the topic of God's wrath.

"Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring. This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering. For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the 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. These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marvelled at on that day among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed." (2 Thessalonians 1:4-10)

As mentioned in the first chapter of this book, people have rejoiced over this passage, through our church history. The passage seems to celebrate God's retributive anger, especially against non-church people. People have seen themselves as God's avengers, going forth into the nations to punish the ungodly. So many times this passage has been used as a licence to kill and persecute, for

those viewing themselves as “God’s armies.” How wrongly this passage has been understood. The passage has been taken in the Greek sense, of the Greek god of war, Ares, sending us forth in his name. This theology is seen in Western war theory to this present day. However, God is saying nothing remotely like this in this passage.

The text is to be understood in its Hebrew background, as Paul wrote it. It is the same story as we saw in Job and in Romans. God is being justly vindicated by the courts of history. The people he has justified by faith have shown the righteousness of that faith in their lives, by suffering in persecution. Rather than retaliating, they have loved and served their enemies. Surely, there can be no accusation against them, nor against their God. And by this lifestyle of his believers it is seen that God’s judgment against those who persecute them is also just.

But the recompense of God, in this Hebrew language, is not God personally punishing these people, but rather his handing them over to their own fate. He saved his people, but he didn’t save the wicked. This is his judgement. And it is just.

The kind of language Paul uses here is normal, Hebrew style, apocalyptic language. That is, it is symbolic. We are taking the scripture very wrongly when we have not read it in its Hebrew intention. Terms for judgement, like fire and destruction, are used, but in the Hebrew mind, these do not represent God’s personal destruction of his enemies. They do not represent in any way at all, either God’s own direct violence, or a violence God has inspired in the hearts of people to carry out against others. The violence and destruction in no way at all comes from God. He is completely separate from any form of violence. His coming in the flesh, in Jesus, shows us this.

It’s amazing how we can read passages like this and feel they celebrate a type of retributive nature in God. How opposite this is to Jesus, who is the very image and likeness of God. When the disciples wanted to call down fire from heaven against the sinners, Jesus replied that they did not know what spirit was speaking through them. It was not the Spirit of God. Jesus rebuffed the idea that God was in some way the one who executed judgement against people by his own acts of destruction. This was not at all in Jesus and it is not at all in God.

Contrary to this, God claims: “I take no delight in him who perishes. My heart is that they turn and live.” This is always God’s heart, to the very end. He is never desiring that any perish. This is why we are told to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us and to do good to those who mistreat us. So that we may be like God, for this is what he does. He does nothing other than this good to his enemies.

From the Hebrew background, the way in which the judgement of God is exercised is very clearly shown. Paul expressed this in Romans 1-2. This is one of those places in scripture in which theology is carefully explained. In regards to God’s wrath or judgment, Paul reflected the same ideas as does the book of Job. God’s judgement is God handing people over to their own ways; it is removing his hedge of protection around them; it is giving them over to their own steadfast resolutions, after constant and long pleading with them to change. In the end God allows man his will, because this is love also. He can’t make man do what is good for himself. He created man to make his own decisions. This is love.

The judgement of God is when God stops striving with man; when he stops pleading with our conscience. It is when our conscience is past hearing and past responding to God’s call to change. Then we are left to our own ways and devices. Then we bring upon ourselves the fruit of our own ways. This is the judgment of God; his handing us over to ourselves. It is a most terrifying thing and it is described in the Hebrew apocalyptic literature in terrifying symbols.

This is what Paul was describing in 2 Thessalonians 1. He was speaking about the judgment coming on Jerusalem in his own generation. We can see it in James, in Peter, in John, Jude and the Revelation. The Jews of Jerusalem, after hearing the gospel and the constant call of repentance from all the Prophets, from John the Baptist, from Jesus, and from the church, would finally be handed over to themselves. Horrible civil war broke out among them and then the brutality of the Roman army came against them to bring peace. The suffering was immense, but it was in no way motivated by God. Rome was motivated by greed, for empire and wealth. The rulers of Jerusalem were motivated by the same thing. God was motivating none of them to bring about what came to pass. It was entirely from man, from start to finish.

God's judgement was that he handed them over to their own destruction, and he saved with eternal life those who repented and who served their fellow man in love, as God does, and according to the new kingdom God is building in the world. And this judgement was just. And it was necessary to save and renew his creation. This is how God acts in history, and will act still in our world, until his promises of a renewed world come to pass. In Hebrew style, apocalyptic language, this judgment is depicted by symbols of the Lord coming on clouds, or of fire. These symbols are all taken from the Old Testament, where they are used repeatedly, and they are never literal.

Coming back to the book of Job, we see the same issues unfolding, as we see in Thessalonians; God's justice in world affairs on trial. Satan accuses God, claiming he must act against Job. Instead of destroying the accuser with violence, and becoming like satan himself, God allows this "devil's advocacy" to be tried in history. This still happens today. The righteous will go through trials as history vindicates the program of the kingdom of God in renewing this world.

These trials don't mean we are being judged by God, but that we are his servants, the same way Jesus served and overcame the enemy on the cross. We all have this calling. And if we love God, this calling shouldn't seem strange to us. Satan has his way in this world because of sin. We have been redeemed from his destruction and we are now serving God in overcoming this accuser in our nations.

God gave permission to satan to come against Job, but to a limited degree. This attack occurred in different ways. One was the fire which fell from heaven. Another was a strong wind which came up against his house. Another was a horde of criminals that came in and destroyed his properties. We are not told what this fire was and how it came about. The meaning of the term "fire from heaven" is that it was a judgment from God. It doesn't mean the fire literally came down from heaven upon the people. It means that God passed the judgement and removed his hedge of protection, allowing the calamity to come in.

The text is specific that it wasn't God who was doing this. God wasn't the "destroyer."

The text is clear that satan motivated the hearts of those who came against Job, and he was entirely the one who brought the destruction. It is unclear to us still how he can influence wind, etc. I am not sure that he can directly. But if God, moved by the accuser, removes his keeping hand from our world, things like this can happen. Weather patterns in the world are in large ways impacted by the greed of man, in our environmental degradation. This is very plain to see. Just fly across the Sahara Desert and feel the strong winds on a clear day. Man, over the years, has done much to destroy these environments.

It is plain in Hebrew text that this is what the judgement or wrath of God means. It is God handing man over to his own destruction. It is his removing of the hedge. I am convinced this is what happened in the Flood. When you read the text in Genesis carefully, it is clear to what extent

mankind destroyed the world. It happened over a long period of time. Everything was destroyed by his greed, his wars, his empires, his killing. Not only humanity and animal life, but also all of the vegetation. Look how wars have destroyed the land in Israel over the years. And that is minimal compared to what happened before the Flood. There was a large population. There was no goodness. Every thought of man was wicked all the time. Somehow this destruction unlocked weather patterns in the world that brought about this deluge.

God's judgment was to remove his hand and allow it to come, in order to save his creation. God is not the destroyer. Man is. God is the saviour.

The recent cinema movie about Noah shows this in graphic details. It's funny that many people decried this movie as environmentalism. It just shows what an un-holistic "gospel" we have developed in recent years.

In the deluge, God removed his hand, and allowed human activity to run its course upon nature. He took away his grace, his protective hedge. He didn't kill the people. Man did it to himself. The language says God sent the flood, but in Hebrew culture the meaning is clear. Just as with Job, it means God opened the door by removing his hedge.

The same is the case with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The point comes, in which God can no longer sustain a just case for leniency, when he must allow the accuser his rights. Sodom and Gomorrah had come to the point that God could not uphold a case for their survival, and so he took away his hedge.

This is judgement in the Hebrew view, in the Hebrew texts of the scripture. But God did not destroy Sodom, except in the Hebrew sense of the word, in that his rule in heaven passed the decree that allowed it. This is the fear of the Lord. It was man who destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, by opening the door through their continued sin. "Fire from heaven" means that God passed the decree that allowed it. It does not mean that God did it. Sin brings about its own destruction in the end.

This is the meaning of the term "wrath of God" in the Wilderness wanderings of Israel. Satan was daily accusing God of favouritism. "How can you judge Egypt and bring out the Hebrew people who are likewise sinners, just like the Egyptians? This is favouritism." Satan was tempting and then accusing Israel all through the Wilderness wanderings, building a case for the "wrath of God:" permission to destroy.

Satan was accusing God based on God's own principles of justice, trying to destroy God's attempts to renew the world. Satan is after the destruction of the whole of creation. The destroying angel was present in Egypt at the Passover, and according to Paul, it was the same destroyer who brought these calamities upon Israel throughout their Wilderness wanderings. It wasn't God. God is the author of life. Satan is the destroyer, through temptation, accusation and then the legal case to have the hedge of protection removed, to give man over to his own self destructive devices. This is judgement.

God is not a god of wrath or anger in the human sense of the term. Anger is used as an anthropomorphism in scripture, to warn mankind of the consequences of sin, in a language we understand. But God is not a man, nor is he a Greek god, and he does not have our human tendencies.

It's time we stop supporting our anger by an appeal to God's anger and start seeing God's anger instead as compassion, suffering and calling sinners to repentance and love. This is the way we also should express our anger at the destructive forces of the world. We show compassion to sinners and

to our enemies, to care for them, to show them God's love, which has saved us. We don't accuse them and then destroy them.

God hates sin and destruction and what it does to people, and his response is to call us out of it, calling us by his own cross. Our anger at the sin in the world is to be expressed by "com-passion:" which means "to suffer with," as we call ourselves and others out of this form of behaviour.

The anger of God, as seen in Jesus, is carried out through serving our enemies. If we are angry at sin, we do the opposite, which is to love and help those who are overtaken by it in this world. And there is no use appealing to Jesus' cleansing of the temple, or his harsh words against the Jews. These actions were aimed at us, God's people, calling us to serve our enemies, as God does. Jesus was warning us, that if we don't serve our enemies, then we will have our part with them in the end. And in the temple, Jesus took a small shepherd's whip to move the animals, not to beat them and not to whip any people with it.

Eternal Conscious Torment

Now to turn to the texts in the scripture that speak about eternal punishment. What do these texts mean? Different views existed in earlier church history, but the view that these texts represent eternal conscious torment in a literal lake of fire gained strength in the European Middle Ages. When it was suggested by some that this view seemed out of character for a just God, it was answered that the weight of the punishment is equal to the value of the person who was sinned against: since God's holiness is infinite, the punishment must also be infinite in severity and duration. However, it could be answered again that this principle is out of character with God's own law, in which a crime wasn't considered lesser or greater depending on whether it was committed against a poorer or a more 'important' person.

The reason put forward for eternal conscious torment seemed more to reflect the inequality and injustice of Feudal society than God's own law or character.

But arguments like the above can go back and forward endlessly. The matter finally comes down to, what does the scripture say? And this of course requires interpretation, because people reading the same scripture can come to very different conclusions. So what are the main issues in interpretation?

Two issues are:

1. What is the style of text we are reading?
2. What was the historical significance of these texts to the people in the day the texts were written?

The issue in some people's mind is, are we dealing with a god of irrational anger? This is sometimes answered by saying, it is not for us to judge, we are just to accept what God says. This is obviously very true. Our own understanding is very limited. But on the other hand, God does not expect us to suspend our common sense of justice. Nor does God act against the common light he has given to humanity. Rather, he asks us to see his justice and love and to copy it, to reflect his character in our lives towards others. If we see a god who has such enduring hatred towards his enemies, this will certainly reflect in the character of the church towards our "enemies." I have heard, on many occasions, this view of eternal conscious torment, being used as an excuse for our own violence.

The Old Testament

Ok, what does the scripture say? Let's start in the Old Testament. There is no teaching there of eternal conscious torment in fire. Isaiah 33:14 asks, "Who will endure everlasting burnings?" This is about the chaff that Israel keeps bringing forth for the fire it has ignited by itself. This is important, when we later consider the book of Revelation. God does not light the fire that consumes his enemies. People light it by their own works. Once again, as in the book of Job, there are other passages that say God brings forth the fire, but the plain meaning of this, in Hebrew text, is that this is God's judgement, not that he does it directly himself.

When we read the whole of Isaiah 33, it is clear that it is not speaking about hell, in our modern sense of the term. It is not speaking about conditions in an afterlife. It is speaking about a fire that continually consumes their nation, about the righteous who will endure this fire, and it shows that in the end the wicked disappear from the earth.

Isaiah 66:24 is also often cited, where the worm eats the dead bodies. We will speak of this further below, but this is speaking of “dead bodies”, not living torment, unless we change the wording of the text.

The Old Testament speaks of the grave, where we get the word sheol, or hell from. The grave was a place of destruction, meaning where the body rots and decomposes, like God said to Adam and Eve, “From dust you came and to dust you shall return.” There are repeated texts all through the Old Testament that speak of the destruction of life in the grave: e.g. Deut 29:20, 32:22, Psalms 1:4, 6, 2:9, 9:6, 34:16, 21, 37:2, 9--10, 20, 27, 34, 38, 50:22, 58:7-8, 69:28, Proverbs 8:36, 10:25, 12:7, 24:20, Isaiah 1:28, 30--31, 5:24, Dan 2:35, Nahum 1:10, Malachi 4:1.

This destruction came to be represented by symbols such as fire and darkness. The fire represented the destruction of the grave; it consumed fully all who entered it. The darkness represented the hopelessness of the grave; we would be cut off from the living, never to see our descendants again. When the New Testament speaks of being assigned to fire or to outer darkness, these images come from the Hebrew Old Testament culture concerning the grave, meaning destruction. We are not to apply a foreign Greek idea to these phrases of conscious torment in an afterlife. The weeping and gnashing of teeth Jesus spoke referred to the sorrow and anger of those assigned to destruction.

The destruction of Sodom in Genesis serves as a prominent early paradigm for judgement. It comes with sulphur and pitch and this is the background to the lake of fire imagery in the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation is symbolic, so, for example, symbols of everlasting torment in Revelation depict everlasting destruction, as we see in the Sodom account. We don't use the symbol to interpret the rest of scripture, but the rest of scripture (i.e., the Sodom and other accounts) to interpret the symbol. The judgement upon Sodom was a complete destruction. The theme God established there as a paradigm for judgement, wasn't eternal conscious torment, which was not mentioned, but destruction. This is how we interpret the symbols of destruction in Revelation.

Jude said the destruction of Sodom was an example of God's eternal fire. In Genesis it says “fire from the Lord in heaven” fell upon Sodom. In the Hebrew tradition, this didn't mean the fire literally came from heaven, but that it came from the heavenly judgement. We saw in a previous chapter what this means in Old Testament texts. It means that God removed his hedge of protection, which allowed destruction to follow.

In the same way “eternal fire” means fire from God's eternal throne, which has eternal consequences: an everlasting judgement of destruction, from which there is no return. The biblical paradigm is destruction, not eternal conscious torment. The fire “consumes.” As Peter said, “... he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly...” Peter said the judgment was destruction, annihilation. And he also said this is the example God gave us of his judgement.

There are parables of destruction in the Old Testament. One of the them is in Isaiah 14, where the king of Babylon dies. The grave is personified and speaks to him as he enters it: “Have you become weak, like one of us?” This is Hebrew poetic text. It is not a Greek text about a living underworld of the damned. The Greek developed this mythology in their wars. Their myths came from the violence of their gods and from hatred for their enemies.

The parable in Isaiah 14, means that the king who lived on high, in power and strength, in oppression of the people, in the end has become weak like everyone else. His power could not help him in the grave. This is the meaning of Jesus' parable of Lazarus and the rich man, which Jesus applied to the oppressive, rich class of Jewish people in his day. Jesus was virtually quoting Isaiah 14.

There is also the parable about the destruction of Edom, in Isaiah 34. Isaiah said, Edom will burn with pitch, which is molten tar, or bitumen. The judgment shows that the people were consumed, not tormented after death. Isaiah said the smoke of the burning of Edom would go up forever. Edom was destroyed. If you visit the region today the smoke isn't still rising.

This, rather, is apocalyptic speech, common in the prophets, especially when the scriptures speak of judgement. This is why we get speech like this in Isaiah, in the parable about Lazarus, in Jesus' descriptions of judgment, and in the book of Revelation. They all follow this Hebrew pattern of apocalyptic language; which means everlasting destruction.

Apocalyptic language uses symbols to portray God's judgements upon earth, not in an afterlife. The Hebrew were interested in God's justice for this world, and how he is going to rid this world of evil and renew the world. This is what the imagery portrayed. The Hebrew were not interested in judgements in an afterlife. That was for Greek speculations.

The symbol of eternal fire in Isaiah 34 means that the destruction of the people of Edom would be everlasting, and that there would be no hope of life for them again. "Eternal fire", here or in the Sodom and Gomorrah passage, means total destruction, from which there is no hope of restoration. This is the symbolism that comes out of Old Testament sentiments about the finality of the grave.

Other symbolism that entered the Jewish consciousness included the concept of Gehenna. This stems from the reign of King Hezekiah, and the Assyrian attack on Jerusalem. The entire Assyrian army died overnight outside the walls of Jerusalem, and their bodies were thrown into the valley of Gehenna, just outside the city, where the bodies were consumed by the fire and worms. The Assyrians became known by the symbolic term Gog and Magog, which symbolised, in the time of Jesus, "the enemies of God."

In Jewish thinking, all God's enemies would be burned by fire, meaning they would be destroyed, they would perish. This didn't mean eternal conscious suffering, but expulsion from the eternal kingdom of God. This is what happened to Edom. They were cast out of God's kingdom, of his current reign in this world. The Jews were expecting a new kingdom that would renew the world. Their concepts of judgement were about who would enter this kingdom, and who would be burnt up and consumed and be excluded from eternal life.

We can see from the Old Testament that concepts of judgement were about destruction and expulsion from this world, from the realm of the reign of God, to cleanse and renew the world. None of these judgements depicted eternal conscious torment. They all depicted final and everlasting destruction of the wicked, to rescue and heal God's creation.

The New Testament

Lazarus and the Rich Man

There are two issues here of primary importance, as stated above: the literary style of Hebrew text, and the historical context of Jesus' comments.

As stated earlier, this is a parable in the Hebrew apocalyptic tradition. The torments of the rich man represent the consuming powers of the grave, the destructive forces of death. The rich man is taken to be a representative of the Jews, to whom Jesus has been speaking at length about their lack of care for those in need, or for those they regard as their enemies. Jesus' conclusion is that they will

be excluded from the covenant, from the kingdom of God, and instead go down to the pit. This judgment is the context of much of Jesus' teaching. From John the Baptist, to Jesus speaking about what will befall that generation, the topic is the coming destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. This is what the parable portrays.

We generally take Jesus' whole teachings and ministry ahistorically. This means we take him out of his historical context, as though Jesus didn't even live or minister in an historical setting. We divorce all he said from the times and events into which he was speaking. We apply all his teaching to some "spiritual" issues in our own mind, without any reference to the lives and consequent history that was about to unfold in that day. This way of reading the text isn't honest. Jesus was very clearly illustrating the judgment that was poised to hit that generation and showing how they had brought it upon themselves.

The parable of Lazarus and the rich man personifies death, just as Isaiah 14 did. The rich man is living in the same tradition as the kings of the earth. He lives in style and cares not at all for the suffering. Jesus was speaking straight into the selfish lives of the wealthy classes of Jerusalem. The parable gives a name to its main character, because Lazarus means "God is my help." When the rich man dies he has no help before the ravages of death. They consume him. But God helps Lazarus and gives him the inheritance of Abraham. There isn't an actual place called "Abraham's bosom," but the term here means Lazarus is included in God's kingdom, to reign with him in resurrection, in a renewed earth, the Garden of God.

So what is the lesson? The lesson is that God helps those we don't help, and he doesn't help those who help themselves. This is the theme in God's judgment of humanity, "I was hungry and you fed me..." It's unfortunate when we take this parable's language as literal and argue about details of hell or of some "interim state" before the resurrection. We think that our "orthodoxy" on such matters is what is important. This was Jesus' point. The Pharisees' interest was in their "orthodoxy", not in serving. The main point of Jesus is that we are to serve those in need. Has this parable changed our lives, or do we just argue about it and condemn our detractors, and the poor, who we say "God has cursed?"

Mathew 25 - Everlasting Fire

Let's try to deal with Matthew 25 now. Jesus spoke about being seated on his throne and the nations coming before him, where he would judge the world on the basis of our care for others. Those who care inherit the kingdom, those who don't care for others are cast into everlasting fire - they suffer the same fate as Jerusalem did by Rome. This coming judgement on Jerusalem was very much on the mind of the disciples when Jesus was sharing about his rule in this parable. In this parable, people and nations come under the same self-inflicted judgement as Jerusalem. Being "cast into everlasting fire" is an Old Testament term for the destruction of people or a nation. We can see Jesus clearly depicting his rule over the world today, in our current time, in accord to how we treat others.

We have often taught that this passage is about Jesus' second coming. But when we look at it in relation to the Old Testament, it seems to be saying something else in addition to that. Jesus was quoting from Daniel 7, in which "one like the Son of Man" ascends to heaven to be seated on his throne, in the presence of the heavenly Father and his angels. He is given power over all nations, in order that the world may be renewed. This is describing the ascension of Christ into heaven after his resurrection. This is when he sat upon his throne in glory. This is when that rule he was speaking

about began. Being “in heaven” means he is on the seat of power. This is what heaven represents, the place of power over earth: rule over the nations of the world.

This passage in Matthew 25 is employing the usual Jewish apocalyptic language to describe the reign of Christ’s kingdom in this world today. Once again, this passage is very interesting in the historical context of Jesus’ time. Rome claimed that they were the kingdom of God that Daniel 7 spoke of, with divine sanction to rule over the whole world. The Roman Senate actually passed a decree making Caesar this “Son of Man” in Daniel 7. This Roman form of rule, or of global “justice”, came about by brute oppression.

In Matthew 25, Jesus was depicting what true kingdom rule is actually like. He was contrasting his reign for the weak, with Roman greed and force: a completely different form of government and worldly logic on power. Jesus’ transforming rule comes to the world through people who care for the weak. His reign is among the poor. This is where his throne actually is, meaning where his rule actually operates from, rather than from a worldly palace. He is with the poor, so that when we serve them we are serving Christ. He doesn’t transform the world through worldly strength, but through renewed people who care for others. This is what subdues the nations. It is the cross, self-giving, not power.

The people and nations who don’t care for the weak are cast into eternal fire. I spoke about the wrath of God in the previous chapter, and how it works. God removes his restraining grace, or hands us over to our own wills. This is what happened in Jerusalem in Jesus’ time. They refused to help others, so their selfishness is actually what brought destruction to their city. God didn’t do it.

“Casting into the eternal fire” means that when God judges us he allows us to go our own way. A nation that doesn’t care for others will breed such bad grace within its own community that it will rot and decay and eventually self-destruct. This is a clear warning to any of us today. How we care for the orphan, the foreigner and refugee, actually matters. This is the basis of what forms the character of our nation, which forms our future welfare or otherwise as a people.

Taking the parable in Matthew 25 this way aligns it with the message of the Prophets of the Old Testament. This is how they warned nations about ruling with the meekness of God in caring for others, or becoming proud and self-destructive and casting themselves out of the reign of God over his people on earth. In Jesus’ kingdom, this is how he fulfils his gospel and covenant mandate in renewing the world, and bringing every enemy under his feat. His people become a transforming community, renewing the powers of the world through kingdom living and witness. It is through this self-giving witness, that the self-taking logic of worldly power is confronted and renewed.

When we take the view in this passage of a violent god casting people into everlasting torment in flames, personally inflicting everlasting torture upon people, we are reading it completely opposite to what Jesus is portraying. Jesus is speaking about his grace rule, his new people laying down their lives to serve, his peacemaking mission to heal the world. He is not portraying the kingdom of God like Roman brutality which destroys its enemies. The destruction in the passage represents what nations who fail to serve bring themselves into. Isn’t this what happened to Rome? They persecuted the weak and God’s people and they brought themselves to destruction. God’s people inherited the kingdom and the world when Rome fell.

In both of these New Testament sections above, Lazarus and Matthew 25, there is a common thread on what is distinctive about the kingdom of God: service. This is the distinction in all Jesus’ teaching. This is the Old Testament apocalyptic prophecy coming through into Jesus’ teaching. Those people and nations who won’t serve the weak are excluded from God’s everlasting kingdom reign over

heaven and earth. They go into destruction, not by the hand of God, but by their own greed and violence which in the end they inflict on themselves.

This principle of “if we find our life” (become aligned with the self-serving logic of Caesar) “we will lose it” ... but if we “lose our life” (become aligned with the self-giving orientation of the new kingdom rule) “we will find it” applies to us as individuals and as nations.

Gehenna – Unquenchable fire and the worm that doesn’t die

It is often said that Jesus mentioned hell more than any other person in the scriptures. He did so mainly in respect to his teaching to the Jews. And a lot of this teaching was about the judgment coming upon Jerusalem in that generation. Jesus’ teaching continued in the same vein as the Prophets and we shouldn’t assign a Greek context to his words. He was speaking about that generation, how many of them would be cast out of God’s kingdom rule.

This would include death in this life, the destruction of their city and nation, and eternal death or separation from God’s kingdom. Conversely, there would be forgiveness for those who turn to him and their covenant with God, and a new baptism in God’s Spirit that would renew their hearts, empowering them, with suffering, to become God’s new kingdom people healing the nations.

In this context Jesus spoke of Gehenna, which the Jews knew to be a valley just outside Jerusalem. They knew that this was where the bodies of the Assyrian army were cast, to be consumed by smouldering fire and eaten by worms. It was a judgment upon the Assyrians in King Hezekiah’s time. Jesus was warning Jerusalem that the same judgment was coming to them. So here we see the usually Hebrew view of judgement that we see in the Old Testament. Many in Jerusalem would be killed, that is, removed from this world as God renewed and healed the creation, in this instance, set the Christians free from their early persecution, to carry the gospel into the world.

But there was more to the Hebrew background in Jesus’ teachings than the initial judgment that was about to befall Jerusalem. In Jewish expectation, the eternal kingdom of God was about to come. This would be ushered in by the resurrection of all people. Then those who were worthy would go into the eternal rule of God in a renewed heaven/earth joined creation. But those who were not worthy would then be destroyed everlastingly. We see this in Daniel 12. They would go into everlasting shame and contempt.

This doesn’t mean eternal torment. In Jewish culture, shame and contempt were associated with the grave. It meant that the people had fallen short and missed out on God’s promise and plan for his creation. Instead of ruling over God’s creation, as Genesis 1 states, they had become unfit for it. The everlasting shame wasn’t an everlasting conscious experience they would have, but the reputation of shame. Daniel calls this everlasting shame and contempt, because it would be eternal. In the second death, there would be no way back.

So the second death is the ratification of God’s earlier earthly judgements. People are raised and judged and the earthly judgement is then ratified as eternal. This is the second death. So Jews in Jesus’ day, expecting the kingdom of God, knew that this resurrection and judgement were coming. And they knew the results of it if they perished. They would face eternal exclusion from the kingdom of God, which means everlasting destruction. They would not just face the destruction of their body in the Gehenna of Jerusalem, but the destruction of both their body and soul forever. This was clear to those people Jesus was speaking to.

So when Jesus was speaking of Gehenna, he was speaking both of the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in that generation, and of God's eternal judgment at the resurrection. But the judgement is the same on each occasion. In the first instance, Rome burnt the Jews, great numbers of them, in Gehenna, outside Jerusalem, just as Jesus warned. In the second instance, Jesus said body and soul would be destroyed, not eternally tormented. Destruction is the Jewish theme of judgement.

Why then do we think that Jesus was speaking of eternal torment? His parable about the harvest tells us that the weeds will be burned up, consumed, destroyed, as in an oven. In the case of the second death, this isn't a literal fire. It means that God doesn't grant the people eternal life. He doesn't save them. They are not part of his covenant. They face destruction. There are just a couple of words of Jesus that people use to apply a Greek concept of eternal torment to his teaching. These are "where the fire is not quenched and the worm does not die."

Now, whether Jesus was speaking about the fire and worms in the valley outside Jerusalem, that their dead bodies would be thrown into, or the metaphorical fire and worms that destroy both body and soul in the eternal judgement, the meaning was the same. In both cases the meaning was destruction, not torment. In the valley outside Jerusalem the fire kept burning and the worms kept eating until the bodies were completely consumed. This is the same vision that is applied to the eternal destruction, one where the body and soul are fully consumed.

This is taken from Isaiah 66:24, a passage about the destruction of Jerusalem in that day by Rome. This is one of the sections of the Old Testament that Jesus was teaching from. Isaiah said, "And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh." This is a picture of the destruction of the bodies of the dead in Gehenna outside Jerusalem. It isn't a description of the torment of the dead. It is also an apocalyptic description of the second death: the dead are consumed, not tormented.

There are other passages that speak of unquenchable fire. Like this one from Ezekiel: "Say to the southern forest: 'Hear the word of the Lord. This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am about to set fire to you, and it will consume all your trees, both green and dry. The blazing flame will not be quenched, and every face from south to north will be scorched by it. All flesh shall see that I the Lord have kindled it; it shall not be quenched.'" (Ezek 20:47)

Here, Ezekiel was speaking of the judgment coming against Jerusalem, just as Jesus said. He said the fire would be unquenchable. This means God will send war against Jerusalem. Nothing would stop this judgement from taking place. Nothing would be able to put this fire out, there would be no escape from it, until its task had been completed. "Not quenched" means that there will be no defence against the armies coming against Israel.

This passage is not speaking of an eternal torment. It's like a fireman that rushed to save a house and says the fire was unquenchable. He didn't mean it burns forever. He means he could do nothing to save the house. It's the same with the worm. It means there will be no salvation from its destructive power.

Another verse in the Old Testament that speaks of unquenchable fire is Jeremiah 17:4, "for in my anger a fire is kindled that shall burn forever." This again, rather than proving eternal torment, proves the opposite. Looking through Jeremiah it is clear that the fire is to destroy Jerusalem. This destruction is described in great detail, and it is always about their lives and dwellings on earth. Nothing at all is said about after-life torment. John Gill said about the term "shall burn forever" in Jer 17:4, "here it only means until these people and their country were consumed by the enemy."

The same chapter of Jeremiah confirms this: “If you do not listen to me ... I will kindle a fire in its gates and it will devour the palaces of Jerusalem and not be quenched.” This means that the fire will not go out until it has completed the destruction. Likewise, Amos 5:6 says, “Seek the Lord and live, lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel.” Here, unquenchable fire means, until it has destroyed. There is no doubt what unquenchable fire means in the Old Testament.

So when Jesus was speaking of the fire of Gehenna, he was speaking of both the fire outside Jerusalem that would consume the victims of Rome, and the eternal fire of God’s eternal judgment to cleanse his everlasting kingdom. In both cases Jesus was speaking of destruction. In in neither case was he speaking of a fire that God ignites as the primary source. It is a destruction that comes forth from our own sin and destroys us, unless God saves. But God doesn’t save if that destruction is our own final will.

In the Jewish mind of that time, death without resurrection to life meant that people would be excluded from the eternal reign of God’s kingdom. The common thread in Jewish theology was the imminent coming of God’s reign to earth. The righteous would be raised to enjoy that kingdom. The wicked would not. God’s judgement would exclude them from the gift of life. Instead, the wicked would perish. This was the nature of the discussion in Jesus’ time. They weren’t having a Greek discussion about heaven and hell, as we may often have the discussion today. Their discussion was about entering God’s eternal rule or not entering it. This was the discussion that Jesus entered into, as he debated with them.

This is a long subject to go into here, but in Western theology the debate has shifted to be about whether we go to spend eternity in heaven or hell. This debate has arisen from the Greek heritage perspective, brought into the scripture. It isn’t the Hebrew background to the texts. For the main part, it wasn’t what the Jews were thinking in Jesus’ day. As we look at this in other notes, the promise to the Jews was about the kingdom of God, or sometimes called the Promised Land (about our land and nations in this world, rather than just being spiritual), or God’s renewal of earth.

It’s called the New Heavens and the New Earth, meaning the conjoining of heaven and earth, in one restored whole creation. This is what the Jews were anticipating when Jesus came. This is what Jesus was preaching about. The scriptures are speaking about the question the Jews were asking then: “Who will go into this eternal kingdom and who won’t?” The concept of suffering in an eternal torment wasn’t in their thinking and wasn’t something they were asking about. It isn’t in the discussions of the scripture. We are just not used to looking at scripture in this Jewish sense.

The Revelation

Ok, now one of the big ones: the book of Revelation. Our main sources for believing in eternal conscious suffering normally come from this book. So let’s have a go at this. Firstly, the book is symbolic. This shouldn’t need to be said. It is clearly stated in the opening and is clearly seen throughout the book, yet people still take statements literally and then use them as proof sources for doctrines.

Second, and this is so prevalent, people deny the first century context of the book. Rather, people often apply the book directly to today’s world events in a completely arbitrary way, claiming some kind of spiritual authority to do so. These claims are always proved false. But the result is we cease considering the book’s message in a valid manner.

The book traces the persecutions of the church during the first century. It promises victory, as the church follows the Lamb, refusing to imbibe the violent, self-centred nature of the beast and the world: this is what it means to overcome the world. This victory doesn't come by God's personal acts of violence against the wicked, but by their own acts of brutality coming back upon themselves. The enemies eventually fall.

This victory is portrayed in battle type language, which is common also in the Old Testament, but when this symbolism is unfolded, the battle that the Lamb and his people fight is one of self-giving witness - the cross - and this witness prevails over the darkness. All prophetic language in scripture about God's battle is about the victory of the cross of the Lamb. It is never about any acts of killing or brutality on the part of either God or by his people. We will look at this language more closely in another chapter.

There are different opinions about the identity of the beast and the false prophet. My view is that these represent Rome, led at that time by Nero, and Jerusalem. Jerusalem was also the whore, the unfaithful bride, leaving their faith in God to commit fornication with Rome for power, security and wealth. Rome and Jerusalem were then the main sources of persecution for the early church. These themes continue throughout history. Either we side with the Lamb and care for the weak, or we side with power and destroy the weak directly or indirectly. We either lose our life to find it, or we hold on to it to lose it. The message of Revelation is just as real to us today as it was in the first century.

So I identify Babylon the whore with Jerusalem in the first century. Its fall is spoken of in Revelation 17 to 19, which includes many quotations from passages in the Old Testament that speak about the fall of Jerusalem: e.g. the voice of the bride groom not being heard, and the light of the candle no longer being seen, are from Jeremiah, where God's final judgment on Jerusalem is foretold. Other people see Babylon as foretelling the fall of ancient Rome. Our slightly different views here are not the main point. The point is about power. What side of worldly power are we on, the Lamb's, the beast's or the false prophet's, the group who claims to be of God, but who isn't following the Lamb?

So this brings us to Revelation's description of the torment of Babylon. One passage says, "And the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever. There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image, or for anyone who receives the mark of its name." (Rev 14:11) This is almost an exact quote from Isaiah 34, which we looked at earlier. There, Edom was destroyed.

The smoke would rise day and night forever, but that communicated the finality or the everlasting nature of the destruction, not a torment in an afterlife. This is clear, because when Edom was destroyed the fire went out, though the effects of the fire in destroying the people's lives remained. Isaiah was using poetic language to warn the people of the permanence of the judgement. This is what "everlasting" or "eternal fire" means in this apocalyptic language: fire whose destructive effect is eternal. The imagery in Revelation is saying the same thing.

Let's have a look at the Isaiah quote concerning Edom, which John uses in Revelation, "It will not be quenched night or day; its smoke will rise forever. From generation to generation it will lie desolate; no one will ever pass through it again." (Isaiah 34:10). Here again is an unquenchable fire. The term "day and night" is used. Its smoke is said to rise forever. These are all the same symbols we see in the Revelation. In Isaiah, they refer to the period in which the city is being destroyed. The day and night are during the destruction. The eternal smoke is the same, during the period of the city's destruction. The unquenchable fire, again, refers only to the period of the city's destruction.

These are all symbols for eternal destruction, not eternal torment. At the end of this destruction, the city is still. The smoke ceases, the fire ceases, the unease of the fire "day and night" ceases, and

what is left is a barren wilderness. Destruction is the theme. This is how the symbols are used in Revelation.

The description of Babylon's destruction is carried on in Rev 18-19. Rev 18:9, 18 speak of the "smoke of her burning"; 18:10, 15 speak of her ongoing "torment" as the city is being destroyed. The chapters define the torment to represent the destruction of the city. It is not speaking of a torment in an afterlife. This destruction is described again in 19:3, "her smoke rose up forever and ever." The plain meaning of this, from the perspective of the onlookers, is that the smoke did not stop until the city had been consumed. The city will be found no more. (18:21) This is what "forever and ever" meant. It lasted until the destruction was complete. It is traditional Hebrew apocalyptic language for a final destruction for those people. It is not speaking of eternal torment.

Rev 19:20 sees the beast and the false prophet taken and thrown into the lake of fire. The beast and the false prophet are not individuals. They represent powers, such as Rome and Jerusalem. Although these consist of individuals, the institutions are more than just Nero, or one of the High Priests. The vision of these powers being thrown into the lake of fire means the loss of their dominion over the saints. You can't torment institutions in a lake of fire. This vision depicts the destruction of these institutions.

This vision in Rev 19:20 is taken directly from Daniel. In Dan 7:11, this same beast was "destroyed" by the burning flame. In Dan 7:26 it says the court shall sit and the dominion of the beast shall be taken away and the beast shall be consumed and destroyed. Again, the apocalyptic language of the beast being tormented forever means its final and eternal destruction. It is not speaking of the beast's state in an afterlife.

The same shall happen in history to all beasts (Dan 7:12), as God's kingdom continues on, renewing our creation. Revelation isn't just for the edification of the early church, but also for us all, and shows us the ongoing victory of the Lamb, as "the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ," through the same process of serving renewal. The way the church overcame the first beasts, by not loving their own lives, even to death, by loving and caring for others, including our enemies, is the way we overcome all beasts and renew the world. This is the message of Revelation: we overcome the beasts and their violence by following the Lamb and his cross.

When Revelation speaks of the devil being thrown into the lake of fire and being tormented day and night, the symbolism is the same as is discussed above. The "he shall be tormented day and night forever and ever" is the same language used in Isaiah 34 for the destruction of Edom. There is only a slight variation in the words. In Isaiah 34 it is the "fire will not be quenched day and night ... forever."

In Rev 20:10 it is "lake of fire and brimstone ... and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever." In the Isaiah passage, the fire burns day and night forever, and in the Revelation passage the torment is day and night forever. There is no difference between these passages. Even the lake of fire and brimstone is the same. Isaiah 34:9 reads, "Its streams shall be turned into pitch, and its dust into brimstone." In Isaiah 34 this same language we find in the Revelation was said to represent destruction, not afterlife torment.

In Revelation torment means the process of destruction. The only way we can say it means torment in an afterlife is to interpret Revelation on the basis of some other worldview apart from the Hebrew Old Testament worldview. And there is no proof that will enable us to do this.

People may protest that it isn't fair if the devil gets destroyed. They may argue the same about people who don't repent. "How is that justice?" We have a very unhealthy idea of justice. Justice is normally seen from the perspective of what is good for ourselves. In the devil's case we are not told how long this process of destruction is. We aren't told much at all. We are just told what the final outcome will be: a universe cleansed of evil forever. Evil has been destroyed. This is comforting.

The grave and death also are thrown into the lake of fire. This confirms the imagery. The grave and death are not people, but powers that afflict God's people and creation. They can't be tormented in an afterlife, but they can be destroyed. Revelation is speaking of the final conquest, the destruction, or death, of death. It is taken out of God's creation forever, along with Apollyon, the Greek god of destruction. Destruction is destroyed. We end up with a creation without destruction, but only life.

This vision is an encouragement to the weak and to the people of God, and to all who do what is right, but who are mistreated by the powerful of the world. It is saying to us that we should continue in well doing, in patience, keeping ourselves from the world's corruption, violence and self-enrichment, but rather help others. The encouragement is that evil shall not prosper in the end. The Lamb, his cross and righteousness shall overcome all these things and the creation shall be filled with goodness only. All wickedness shall perish from God's eternal order.

"Blessed are the meek, for they inherit the earth."

"Woe to you, destroyer (the Assyrian, Gog and Magog) ... our eyes will see the King in his beauty and view a land that stretches afar (lit: a vast creation full of goodness). In your thoughts you will ponder the former terror: "Where is that chief officer? Where is the one who took the revenue? Where is the officer in charge of the towers?" You will see those arrogant people no more..." (Isaiah 33:1, 17-19)

This is the vision John had in Revelation. A renewed land. A creation without evil, conquered by the Lord, without using evil to achieve it. God conquers through the Lamb and those who follow the Lamb.

Some Final Thoughts

The concept of eternal conscious suffering is based on the assumption of the unconditional immortality of the soul. This concept can't be found anywhere in scripture. Immortality is conditional. Immortality was promised to Adam and Eve, as depicted by the tree of life. They were not created immortal, but with the potential of immortality in the plan of God.

After the fall of Adam and Eve, God said to them, "From dust you have come and to dust you will return." And he drove them out of the Garden, lest mankind should eat of the tree of life and live forever, in their sinful condition. It has sometimes been claimed that because man was created in God's image that this means unconditionally immortality. That is an assumption. The scriptures don't say that. According to Genesis 1, the image of God was about mankind's rule over God's creation. This was lost in the fall and is restored in the gospel.

We could say that immortality is one of the goals of creation. God is fighting death with his kingdom, overcoming it with life. Death shall eventually be overcome in his entire creation. This is what the symbols of Revelation mean. Through the resurrection of Christ, God grants eternal life to all who inherit it. Martin Luther called the idea of the unconditional immortality of the soul one of five "monstrous opinions" held by the church of the Middle Ages.

The most common view in the early church fathers was unconditional immortality and that sinners would be excluded from eternal life by annihilation. See the usual fathers for this for comments that tend in this vein, such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Barnabas, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and others. Some scholars believe that unconditional immortality came into the church through the later Greek fathers, from the Platonic school. The unconditional immortality of the soul was a firm Greek idea. It was from these fathers that it began to take root in the Western church, especially through Augustine, heralded by the Catholics and by the later Reformers.

The Hebrew tradition about the afterlife looked to the resurrection, followed by judgement. After death, the next event in our lives would be resurrection. The future the Hebrew saw, from Daniel 12, for example, was resurrection, judgement and inclusion in the kingdom of God, in a joined heaven/earth restoration, or perish. In some of the Jewish literature outside the scripture, there was mingled some Greek/Persian ideas about an interim period, say of suffering in hades before the judgement, or of enjoying a preliminary paradise.

But these ideas were not Hebrew in origin, and do not feature in Jesus' teaching. When Jesus teaches of the future, he speaks of resurrection, followed by judgement. This is spelled out in his discourse in John 5. All shall be raised from the dead and go to this judgement, and from there, some will go to a resurrection of life and others to a resurrection of condemnation.

The reason for this Hebrew position stems from their view of creation. They saw from the first verse in scripture, Genesis 1:1, that God made heaven and earth to be his conjoined temple, and he dwelt with Adam and Eve in the Garden. This is the view of a conjoined creation that we see at the end of Revelation, 21-22. The Hebrew saw that God made mankind for earth, for his soul and body to be united in one holistic life. They didn't see mankind living in an existence separate from earth, separate from his original destiny, even if just for an interim period. This "interim period" suits more the Greek position, where the spirit and body of man are separated; the Greek even believed it is better if the spirit is separated from the body, and many denied the bodily resurrection altogether.

Conversely, we are made for our bodies, and with them we are made to rule on earth, in the presence, or in the fellowship of God. This is our only identity in the Hebrew view. The gospel is about our restoration to this position, not being disembodied, or receiving a different body for heaven, rather than for earth. Contrary to the Greek view, the Hebrew saw life, heaven, earth, our souls and bodies, all in one purpose and plan of God, and they did not image life out of this plan, say in heaven alone, even for just an interim period.

One of our confusing areas is to do with the "interim state," the time between death and the resurrection. Many of us have developed rigid doctrines in this area, based entirely upon our traditions, especially the way we interpret certain New Testament passages, such as Paul, "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord," or, "I know that when I put off this present tabernacle, I have a tabernacle prepared for me in heaven."

We could interpret these in different ways, according to our tradition. They could mean Paul goes to heaven for spiritual existence, or that he goes straight to the resurrection. The body prepared in heaven, means by the heavenly decree and power. This would be the Hebrew meaning of the term. When we look at church history, and even different branches of the global church today, we find many different biblical expressions of faith in this area. We need to be tolerant of each other.

My view is that the scripture teaches that "it is appointed to man once to die, and after that the judgement." (Heb 9:27) This means the resurrection comes after death, as the body is necessary for us to stand judgment in our fully human identity, and "receive what is due for what we have done in

our body," (2 Cor 5:10) There is no judgement without the body being present. Paul speaks of this resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15; we who are in Christ have our body made alive, immortalized, empowered by the Spirit. This is not reinterpreting the texts, but it is going back to the early fathers, before the infusion of Greek ideas.

When we look at Acts, which we might say is the most evangelical book in the Bible, eternal conscious torment isn't mentioned once. We may believe that "eternal conscious torment" is necessary, or people won't "repent." This is unfounded. And many people are put off by the "gospel" of such a monstrous god. Paul spoke of the terror of the Lord, meaning death, from which Christ has redeemed us (2 Cor 5:14); Rom 6:23, "The wages of sin are death,"; 2 Thes 1:9, "everlasting destruction." In John 3:16, it is "perish." In Jude it is, "utter darkness," what the Old Testament calls death, e.g. Job 10:21, 17:13-16.

Paul didn't say we come to Christ to escape everlasting torment, but for transformation, so that our works may change for good, and so that from them we may reap life instead of destruction. This is his teaching throughout Romans., e.g. Rom 8:13. Death is not something God inflicts upon people, but it is the fruit of the way people live. The atonement is not an insurance policy, but the way in which God changes our lives to change our fruit, so we reap life. The teaching in Acts was that those who didn't repent would be "cut off," "destroyed," and that these people "counted themselves unworthy of eternal life." Evangelism, preaching the good news of eternal life, in Acts, was highly successful, without eternal conscious torment once being mentioned.

Just a final note about admitting people's "spiritual experiences" into the question. I have listened to many testimonies. Some people have gone to a "Catholic hell" (purgatory) and some to a "Protestant hell." Others have gone to a Catholic heaven, to return to tell us the message they received was we aren't worshiping Mary enough. Others have gone to an "end-times" heaven and returned to tell us the date Jesus is coming.

Others have gone to a Word of Faith heaven and come back to tell us that God wants us rich. These visions generally suit the tradition of the people. Some people straight deceive others, some people are deceived by experiences themselves and others just have a vivid imagination. It's not for me to judge any person. But that is the point. I only have scripture to go by in the end, "the more sure word of prophecy," and only on this will I form such views as these.

I do not accept these testimonies. In my view they are false. They are also damaging to people, and bind them in fear, and give them a very false picture of God. People elevate such visions to be equal or above the word of God, and this is a very poor basis for our faith. They are false food and they distort our spiritual lives.

Conclusion

The scriptures do not portray a God of anger and violence, who inflicts torment of people for all eternity. They portray God through Jesus Christ, who lays down his life for his enemies and pleads for their repentance. They portray a God of grace who forgives, and a God of justice, who finally, and in much displeasure to himself, hands people over to the fruit of their own self-centred and destructive works, if that is what those people finally choose.

And God isn't even the one who destroys them in hell. We only think it is him because we don't know how to read Hebrew scripture. God is not the destroyer. It is Apollyon in the Greek, or Abaddon in the Hebrew. The destroyer destroys people lives, in this life and in eternity. God doesn't

even destroy Abaddon. Abaddon destroys Abaddon: "For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction." Hell is a symbol of this self-destruction. God has no part in the violence. "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. God is love. Love does not hate. God cannot be tempted with evil, neither does he tempt any man."

Devoted to God for Destruction

Looking at God's "terrible behaviour" in the Old Testament.

In this section we look at the satan that works by law, not primarily in accusing God, but in our hearts, accusing and destroying our neighbours.

There are horrific stories in the Old Testament. Take for example the story of Israel making and then worshipping a golden calf, with all the sex that went with it. Unbelievable behaviour for anyone, let alone a freshly redeemed people. The danger of this to the nation, the wickedness and destructive violence of paganism in those days, is well documented. This was very serious.

But the reaction of God is also so striking. He immediately said to Moses that he would kill them all, saying he would start a new nation from Moses. Moses pleaded that God would repent of this harshness, as if Moses had more compassion. God agreed with Moses, though later Moses instructed that the Levites go through the camp and slay many of those involved in the idolatry. Three thousand died that day, some of whom had been brothers and family with the Levites who killed them. Then Moses said to the Levites, "You have served the Lord this day."

We are unsure if it was 3,000, as the word use for thousand in the Hebrew text can mean unit or squad. However, this may correspond with the 3,000 who were added to life on the Day of Pentecost, the day the New Covenant was launched, on the same day of the year that Moses came down the mountain with the law. The law is a ministry of death; Jesus is a ministry of life.

The only thing easy with this passage in Exodus 32 is to make mistakes explaining it. So much is going on here. But it looks like God is the same as all the other gods of that day. "Someone has sinned; someone must pay." "The way to overcome the evil of the day is through killing and more violence." "The way to serve God, is to love him by killing your family." Or even worse, we could say that God did this out of jealousy over the other gods. This of course is nonsense, but this is how it looks when reading other accounts similar to this in the ancient world. Gods were always jealous of each other and this was claimed to be the source of much of the fighting.

One thing is clear. This is not the Jesus of the Gospels. He didn't round up idolaters and have them killed. He didn't prosecute anyone by the law. He did the opposite. He freed people who had broken the law. And when his disciples wanted to act like Moses and the Levites and call down fire on sinners, Jesus rebuked them. He said such behaviour wasn't at all from God. So what is going on here? How is it, that in Exodus God is saying these things, but Jesus tells us that this isn't God, and that people who say and do such things, don't even know God, but are rather unknowingly serving satan? And worse, Jesus says, they "are of their father, the devil." Is this record in Exodus mistaken? Do we just throw it out, as the stories of men?

As I said, this is very complex. You may say you only like simple teaching, but this isn't simple. You try taking a rebellious people out of slavery and see how you do! We are going to look again at some issues we covered in an earlier chapter, but go into them a bit more here.

First of all, the Hebrew people chose the law. This stems from the Garden of Eden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The law they chose to live by, by which they accused God's justice, was the same law that afterward accused them. Satan said he was leading them to freedom, but he was leading them to be false judges of the law, accusers of others. When Adam and Eve grasped at the law to accuse God, satan laughed. It was the same voice of accusation, now lodged within their conscience, that condemned them.

It wasn't God who introduced law into the Garden. God warned us about the law. He spoke to Adam and Eve, like parents warning their children. Satan introduced law into this world, by using it to accuse God. Once man grasped it, Satan would use our "awakened conscience" in humanity, to draw us to accuse and fight each other.

This guilt began to tear away at human life. Adam and Eve cut themselves off from God, whom they perceived as the source of their guilt. Next, Adam, accused his wife, transferring his guilt onto those around him. The wife did the same. Guilt produced accusation, which led to violence, in order to cleanse that guilt and rectify the perceived problem. We think we demonstrate our righteousness by condemning others. Violence brings appeasement to our conscience.

What a terrible captivity humanity is in! This is at the heart of Jesus' teaching, about the speck in our neighbour's eye; about the murderous legalism of the Pharisees. This is the slavery Israel was in when they came out of Egypt. From this human nature, Satan wreaks havoc all through our relationships.

God didn't choose the law for Israel, they chose it for themselves. When Moses went into Egypt to call Israel out, immediately the elders of Israel began to accuse him. The law, accusing others, was their bread and butter. After God delivered them through the Red Sea, immediately they went straight back to their accusations. They said they had no bread and no water, and that God had brought them to the wilderness in order to kill them. Satan had filled their hearts with accusations against God. He said God had fallen short of righteousness and justice in how he was treating Israel. And Israel bought it, because judging others in this way, by the law and guilt in their own conscience, was all they knew.

This brings us to the general things Jesus was speaking about: those who live by the law, die by the law. "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone," Jesus said to the Pharisees stoning the woman. That is, if we condemn others by the law, like the woman caught in adultery, then the same law will condemn us. It's just a matter of time. Or, as Paul said, the letter of the law kills. If we want law to judge others, then the law kills us.

Welcome to Sinai, what man chose in the Garden!

So this brings us back to Moses on the mountain with God. Israel were having an idolatrous orgy in the valley. Satan steps in, to put God's justice on trial. But the real work of Satan is in our human heart. The risk here is unreasonable human retribution, followed by war.

This is what God is really trying to stop here. He was acting to save Israel from the law. We don't normally think of this background issue. We just see "God's wrath." But what if God did nothing? What would have been the result of one group in Israel going into such rampant idolatrous orgy? It would have led to catastrophic infighting between the tribes, murder on a horrendous scale, and the destruction of the nation. Satan would have had a "hay day."

Satan says to God, "You say they are your people, that you have the right to redeem them and carry them out of Egypt, to serve you in the Wilderness." What is Satan's claim? It is that Israel accuses others by the law and now this law must judge them. "The law owns them and must have its way with them." We know this is the background, because this is shown to us in Job. Satan accuses God of unjustly saving Job, claiming that Job didn't love God. Satan did the same later, when Israel returned from Babylon to Jerusalem. He accused Joshua, the priest, saying Israel had not kept God's covenant, so God had no right to save them.

In the Wilderness, satan's accusations were true. God, if he is just, must act. He must take down his hedge and allow satan to destroy them. This is what "wrath" means. It means the judgement of the law. It doesn't mean that wrath is in God's heart towards his people. It is the wrath of the law, of satan's accusation. On the contrary, what is in God's heart, is love for his people. He has pity on their fallenness and their ignorance, just as Jesus showed on the cross: "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." This is what is in God's heart all the while, not just on the New Testament. And we know this by what God did on the mountain next.

God said to Moses, "My wrath must strike the people and kill them all. I will start a new nation from you." Wow, I would think about that! "These rotten people have caused me all this trouble. Now I get to be the head of the new nation. This makes me the top person in God's program, the most important, not just the servant of the promises to Abraham." But Moses said no. He said this would bring discredit to God, for the pagans would say God brought his people out from Egypt, but couldn't look after them in the Wilderness. Satan's accusation against God, that all the people had accepted and were repeating, that God brought Israel out of Egypt to kill them, would succeed.

In replying to God this way, Moses, acting oppositely to how satan would interpret Moses' personal interest, changes everything. God had a man whose selfless motives could not be accused. God could answer Moses' prayer, save his people and be just in doing so. Moses' intercession saved Israel from the law. All the time, Israel was saying that God was trying to kill them, and all the time, behind the scenes, God was doing all he could in a court of law, the court that Israel set up themselves, to save them. But this would only work for so long. If Israel refused to be transformed, the law would eventually succeed against them. Intercession can't be sustained on its own forever.

Let's trace again the work of the law in the human conscience and society from early times. What does it say? It says, "The sinner must be destroyed." Cain was afraid people would avenge his killing of Abel. Either it's in his conscience, or he has seen human society already practices this kind of "legal retribution." By the time of Lamech, the vengeance of the law has grown to highly destructive proportions; "If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times." (Gen 4:24)

If I kill a man, then the people from his village would come out and kill 77 people in my village. This keeps on growing. We can see that legal retribution didn't come from God. Instead of God demanding the death penalty for Cain, he protected Cain, hoping for his salvation. We will look at this more in the next chapter.

After the Flood, God acts to limit this human retribution. This is where the principle of *charam* begins. We will look at this further below, but *charam* means "devoted to God." God takes violence into his sanctuary to limit it, he ritualises it, to curtail human vengeance. For example, after the Flood, God allows meat eating, but hallows the animal's blood.

"And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image." (Gen 9:3-6)

After the Flood, God specifically addressed the violence of man, especially the shedding of blood, and God made the act sacred. The blood of the animals belongs to God. As hollowed, blood shouldn't be shed in a random fashion. The creation in general is to be treated with care, not exposed to human destruction, like it was before the Flood. When an animal is killed, it is to be seen as a sacrifice, its blood is to be devoted to God, to ensure respect for the animal.

God began to bring the human practice of vengeance and sacrifice under his control. Killing of animal flesh, for eating and sacrifice, no doubt was being practiced widely before the Flood, but it had never been sanctioned by God.

It is in this context of hallowing the death of the animals, that God also hallows the death of a man. God says, that man is made in the image of God. God brings this crime of murder under his control expressly for the first time, in order to manage the level of vengeance that the crime causes. Retributive violence against man was to be curtailed. Vengeance was to stop at the person who committed the crime. God sanctioned retribution for murder, because of the hardness of man's heart, and to keep man's retribution to an absolute minimum.

Ancient historians tell us that this vengeance for murder, was to be carried out by the next of kin of the murderer, like an honour killing. The family of the one who committed the murder, was to retaliate against their family member for the crime. This was to pre-empt greater violence occurring against their community from others, like when Dinah was raped in Shechem and the sons of Jacob killed all the men of the town. To stop this severe brutality, which men regularly carried out, the family of the offender was to "cleanse" the crime, before the killing spread to far more people. If it spread, anger and anger would escalate, with vengeance and much greater vengeance.

God didn't bring in a "death penalty" as a law for the world. He brought in measures to curtail human violence. And he did this by hallowing the violence. The person who committed the crime was to be *charam*, devoted to God. And the meaning of *charam* was a vengeance that was limited in scope, not subject to the whims of human violence and wrath. If man must take vengeance, then God would oversee the vengeance to limit it. This doesn't mean the death penalty is God's will. God overthrew the vengeance in our hearts through his cross. We look at this in another chapter.

When Israel committed idolatry in the Wilderness, Moses ordered a similar *charam*. It was a controlled retribution to cleanse the sin. Not to cleanse the anger from God's heart, but from man's. It was an honour killing. The Levites killed their own kinfolk. This limited the repercussions of the sin within Israel, to cut off tribal warfare.

We often see tribal warfare breaking out in Israel when sins of this nature were committed, especially in the book of Judges. Sometimes these acts almost destroyed the entire nation. See Judges 9, 12, 19, 20, 2 Sam 20, 21, for example. Once almost the whole tribe of Benjamin was wiped out when one man's concubine was raped and killed. In modern society we fail to see what is in the background to texts like these.

But the vengeance didn't come from God, and he didn't specify how many would be killed. That was all decided by the Levites who participated. They were cleansing their own family, under the law, and they would decide when the anger of their own people would be appeased. They killed 3,000 and that number was governed by the satisfaction of their own hearts. They knew that would be enough to quell the violence in everyone's hearts. They probably did far more than enough.

After the killing, God said he would work to make atonement for Israel's sin. This atonement was to avert national catastrophe, to satisfy human bloodlust. God would keep working with Israel to limit their destruction, wars and national demise, anytime great sins broke out amongst them. God was working to save their nation, not to punish it.

This is what *charam* means; it is an atonement to limit human vengeance. God would introduce many ways that atonement would work without violence, and this was the way he was leading the

world through the law and through Christ; to bring us to a way of atonement that is fully free of violence.

It's not God's anger that is being averted by the killing of 3,000 in Exodus 32, but human anger. God takes our anger and sin and ritualises it, makes it *charam*, a divine punishment, a controlled sentence, to stem the violence, to make atonement within our relationships, to save us from the gross wrath or vengeance working in our own hearts. He saves us from the law. It is not God's punishment, but God sanctifying and supervising human revenge to limit its destruction. Remember, he didn't punish Cain.

The law makes atonement for human violence, for the hardness of our hearts. The law does this by prescribing attainments, or deaths, on a limited basis, to appease the satan who works within us. This is why the law is "a ministration of death." (2 Cor 3:7) It is news of death. It is not God's will for mankind. It didn't come because it is what God wanted for man. It came because man listened to satan and took his accusative nature. The law came to curtail satanic wrath working in our lives.

The experience of Israel's idolatrous orgy in the Wilderness passed into their law. In Deut 13, it was said that if a township went into similar idolatry, the next of kin were to kill the inhabitants and pile up their properties and burn them as *charam*, an offering to God. The law was clear, that careful investigation was to be made, to limit wrath to the perpetrators of the crime, rather than the former random vengeance. This action was to prevent tribes taking the law into their own hands and instigating widespread civil disturbances, using such events as excuses for their own political ambitions. The law of *charam* was to cut off this kind of human behaviour.

God made the act sacred to stop the violence spreading throughout the nation. Making it sacred also meant that God took our sin into himself. He was owning the sacrifice dedicated to him. He would become that sacrifice himself, to replace those enemies we were formerly executing. If God sets up a system of atonement, then he can step into that system, as the sacrifice, as the *charam*, and take away the vengeance that is in our hearts. God, far from being the one who demands bloodlust, is the one who gives himself as a victim of our own wrath, when we nail him to a cross, to remove wrath from us. How can we hate our brother, when God gave himself as *charam* for us?

The purpose of *charam* was to reconcile Israel, not with an angry God, but with themselves, to heal the fabric of their nation, to stop sin from destroying the body politic. *Charam* was necessary because of the wrath that works within the human heart. The wrath is the way of man, of our cultures, and God condescended, to lead us towards his kingdom, instead of allowing us to destroy ourselves altogether. We see that the "anger of God" is to work out a plan for our salvation, not from our enemies of the flesh, but from our enemy within.

These laws were given because of the hardness of men's hearts. Man wants sinners destroyed:

- God ritualized the vengeance, or makes it sacred, to limit bloodlust
- Then he replaces the human execution in time with animal sacrifice
- Then he replaces as sacrifice that in time with himself on the cross

... to fully heal our hearts of vengeance, and to take away all human violence from the earth. This is *charam*, that starts after the Flood, that continues in Israel's history, and is seen in Joshua's occupation of Canaan. But we will discuss this occupation below.

There are many examples of laws that weren't God's heart. Deut 21:10-14 says that when Israel went on raids they could kidnap foreign women and bring them home as wives. If they didn't like the women in the morning, they could send them away. But they must not otherwise mistreat the

women. We know God's will is one man and one woman, caring for each other. This law didn't reflect the heart of God, except in that it sought to limit the harm man did. Fallen man is going to behave this way towards women anyway, so at least laws like this limited the effects of such destructive behaviour. This is similar to *charam*. Patriarchy is in no way God's will. Neither is *charam* part of his creation or gospel.

What have we learned about *charam*? It is a principle of God that limits the violence and vengeance within the human heart by controlling it. God controls it by dedicating punishments meted out to himself, where he can place limitations upon the terms of its use. This way the wrath between communities can be appeased and peace can ensue.

This may help explain the *charam* command when Israel came into the Promised Land. This is about the killing of the occupants of the land, as a dedicated offering to the Lord. We know two obvious reasons for this. One is, God was judging the people for their idolatry. We know how wicked and widespread this was. God was cleansing the land of horrific, life destroying practices. The other reason was so that this idolatry wouldn't pollute Israel, as they took up settlement in the land.

So what is wrong with this? Well, is this the God Jesus showed us? He said he didn't come to condemn, but to save. He did not judge and kill sinners in the land, but died for them instead. He did not call his followers to judge and kill sinners, but to love and serve them instead. So we can't follow what Israel did in the Promised Land and say we are serving God. And we can't call on God to judge others either, because he didn't act against anyone in the Gospels.

And we know from Jesus that God's judgement isn't God killing people. The blind man wasn't blind because of God; the Tower of Siloam didn't fall on people because of God. When Rome destroyed Jerusalem, it wasn't God who did it. The destruction of Jerusalem wasn't God's punishment for the killing of Jesus. Jesus forgave them for that. It was what Jerusalem did to itself, because they wouldn't repent. All these things came from man's own works, from man's own wrath.

And God isn't calling us out of the world, so that the sinners won't pollute us. He is calling us to go into the world, to shine our light in the midst of sin. Jesus visited the homes of sinners, he didn't destroy them. If we were in Canaan today, God would send us into their homes to share his forgiveness and love, to give our lives as a true witness of the love of God. God hasn't called us to destroy sinners, as the law demands, but to serve them.

So why *charam* in Canaan? Because Israel was under the law, not because God put them under the law, but because this was their condition. And under the law, the destruction of sinners is demanded, not by God, but by man. Remember Cain again, whom God didn't avenge, but man did, seven times.

This law works within the hearts of sinners, so that human vengeance would overflow in the land. It would become like Lamech's seventy-seven. And if the idolatry of the land affected Israel, then vengeance would overflow throughout their people as well, and fill the whole land with destruction. The land would be filled with violence, from top to bottom, and the nation of Israel could not exist. This was Israel under the law.

So since there is going to be violence, God devotes it to himself and controls it. He establishes a system to atone for violence in the land. It's a system of vengeance that the people themselves know and had been practicing. But God restrains it significantly. This works in different ways:

- Controlled eradication of idolatry
- A system of animal sacrifice to take away guilt and wrath

- Laws of kindness towards the foreigner and poor, to alleviate suffering and wrath that comes into through social estrangement.

... these are the ways God sought to take violence out of the land.

We won't speak in detail of the limited nature of this killing in Canaan:

- It was limited to the fortress cities of the land. "City" then meant military fortress. And they were small cities. They were able to march slowly, with the priests, around Jericho seven times, before completing the battle in one day.
- Peace and repentant surrender was offered before the wars. See Deut 2:26, this was in the designated land of Israel and a pattern for the Canaan conquest.
- The language of Moses and Joshua was hyperbole, according to the normal ancient rhetoric on war. It didn't literally mean every man, woman and child was killed. This is clear within the text itself. Joshua said he had killed every man, woman and child, and then told Israel not to marry any of the men, women or children. The same with the Amalekites Saul "devoted to destruction." They appear repeatedly in scripture after that. The hyperbole means that not one was able to stand against Israel. There is no evidence of genocide.
- The point here is how God made the killing sacred and thus controlled, to atone, to hinder a greater wrath, in his attempt to renew the land through his people, who had no interest in saving lives or caring for their enemies at all. God greatly limited the killings by doing this.
- See also Deut 7:2-5, which clearly uses the same hyperbolic language, and where the point being made is the eradication of the main centres of idolatry in the land, to stop Israel mimicking idolatry and then wrath overflowing through the nation. The main point is not killing the people.

I guess the whole point is that *charam* didn't work, until God took it into himself through the cross. When Jesus came, he found this vengeance still lodged firmly in the hearts of his people. The Pharisees used this *charam* principle to condemn and forsake others. Instead of seeing *charam* as human vengeance, they saw it as God's own nature, the way he wanted them to treat sinners. So, in not visiting sinners and not helping those in need, but seeing the poor as cursed of God, to be *charam*, they failed to heal their land, and brought it into civil war and destruction. By not serving and loving others, they produced a lust for vengeance in others that filled the nation.

They failed to see that God was leading them to Christ, so that he may take our violence out of our hearts altogether, but instead they relished the violence that God allowed Israel to commit under the law, due to the hardness of their hearts.

The point, again, is that the *charam* principle didn't work. Israel killed sinners under the law, killed the idolaters in the land, the adulterers and others, but notwithstanding all this, it didn't save Israel. It didn't change their hearts. Israel still went into idolatry and were in the end banished from the land themselves. Destroying sin in others didn't save them, didn't protect them from sin in themselves. The law of "destroy the sinner", which was in humanity from the fall, and which God curtailed through his sacred dealings with them, didn't heal their land.

What was needed was not a limited vengeance upon the enemy, to satisfy the heart of man, but a new heart altogether. What was needed was not a curtailing of Lamech's vengeance, but a new Lamech.

Our take on this today is often the opposite to what Jesus said. We say *charam* didn't work, not because it didn't heal the violent vengeful nature of the human heart, but because Israel failed to

execute *charam* fully. They disobeyed and left some of the sinners alive, who later led Israel astray. Israel, we say, should have killed more sinners, all of them. Well, this is what the law required. If Israel was going to live under the law, they had to fully carry it out. If we live by the law, then we must kill all who fail under the law, or they will infect us. We still go by this principle today, cleansing our fellowships. That is the way of the law. In the end it brings death to everyone, because that is the only answer it has. Its solution is death, not healing. It is an instrument of vengeance. Even if it tries to limit vengeance and control it, vengeance is still its message.

So this is how we read Paul, saying to the Corinthians, "Take out the leaven that is among you." When we look closely at Paul, he wasn't saying to condemn the person who was the bad leaven, but to heal and restore the person. And this happened. In Second Corinthians, we see this man restored. So what Israel wasn't able to do with sinners in the land, God was doing in the Roman community through the church. He was calling his people to serve and help restore sinners, not kill or forsake them.

Jesus didn't preach *charam*. He didn't preach "destroy the sinner." He preached "support the sinner." If we have an orchard of fruit trees and some of the trees are faulty and weak, then the law says slay them. This is how we often deal with each other, even, or sometimes especially, in the church. This is the problem with an un-renewed Christian, a Christian whom Christ hasn't transformed; we behave this way towards those who fall. Jesus said, "Tie a stick next to the tree to support it. Take out the weeds around it. Put in some fertilizer. Help it. Tie yourself to that person and support them, until Christ is formed in them." This is what everyone in the church should be doing with fallen believers, and with our "enemies" outside the church, even with those in "Canaan."

"Moreover, I gave them statutes that were not good and rules by which they could not have life." (Ezekiel 20:25) This wasn't because God was evil to them, but because of the stubbornness of our own hearts. These laws were to limit our death, not to lead us to life.

Jesus took away the Old Testament principle of *charam*. Many still hold onto it today. The terrorist group, Boko Haram (same root word), uses this principle as an excuse for self-centred violence. Christians use it as an excuse to condemn their enemies, instead of loving them. And we take this principle from the Old Testament, by not understanding what God is doing there, and by failing to reconcile that with the God revealed through Christ on the cross.

The Sermon on the Mount overthrew *charam*. It revealed that *charam* isn't of God. Now Christ calls us to follow the true God, as revealed in him, and not the false god revealed in our own human religions and nature.

In conclusion, what we see again in this area of violence, is God's accommodation of humanity. He starts where we are in our own violence and bloodlust and dedicates it to himself. In this way he can put controls upon it and contain it. Then he can come in the flesh and enter into this religious system of violence, and in suffering, forgive us. This is to expose our vengeful cultures and natures, our condemning systems under the law, and release us from them, setting us free. God accommodated us in of fallen violence so he could lead us out of it into his kingdom of peace.

Be careful of law, it leads to murders of different kinds. Instead, take up your cross.

The Punishing God?

Sometimes it is difficult for us to look at the early chapters of Genesis without our accustomed glasses on. We have generally seen a wrathful God, reacting to human disobedience, taking vengeance for his holiness. But this view portrays God in entirely the wrong way. This is the way the Pharisees saw God. The view we get of God through Christ, is of a suffering God. He doesn't afflict his creation, but he suffers for, and with, his creation. He is a God who feels for the infirmity of fallen creation, and who sets out to restore us from our captivity. This is the God we see in Genesis.

There are not two different Gods; one who suffers for us, and another one who punishes us. We can have a view of God that we might call "Christian polytheism." Polytheism means many gods. When we ascribe differing behavioural patterns to God, it is like we are portraying many gods. One day, God is suffering for us, the next day he is portraying dictatorial anger. Monotheism, rather, depicts one God with one character, which is dependable. This character is "God is love." God doesn't behave outside who he is. "Christian polytheism" means, we can behave in all sorts of ways and claim we are following God, because we think that he behaves in all sorts of ways also. This happens when we misunderstand what the scriptures mean by the wrath of God.

Let's have a look at the wrath of God in early Genesis. Firstly, the idea that God gave Adam a commandment and that he punished Adam for breaking that commandment is very destructive in our worldview. The New Living Translation translates "commanded," in Gen 2:16, as "warned." This is the sense that is being portrayed in the Eastern culture, throughout the Old Testament. The New Living translation is correctly paraphrasing the intent and heart of God. It is showing a loving God who knows what will happen if Adam took the law into his consciousness. God knew what taking the law in this accusative way would do to Adam and how it would destroy humanity, and this is the death God spoke of.

The idea that we broke a commandment and that God punished us for it, is the cause of our violence in the world till today. This is why we get honour killings in various religions around the world. It isn't because of their religion; it is because of their human nature, which we all share. Before we say that it is the fault of their religion, that makes people violent and punish blasphemers, we should realise that we do the same thing. We fail to serve and help those in the world in great need, for precisely the same reason. We say they deserve it, because of this or that. We find excuses not to help, not to love those who have fallen short. We have the same heart, that stems from the same view of the Garden of Eden.

Jesus was showing us that this way of treating other people just has to stop, regardless of what world conspiracy theories we may hold to, or what we may think of others, or what advantage we might lose. We have to begin loving people, and helping them, rather than punishing them.

God gave Adam and Eve rule over his creation. "The gifts and callings of God are without repentance." Satan charges God with being unfair to Adam and Eve, and said Adam and Eve could better run things, their own way. So, for God to be just, to not function in a dictatorial way, he allows this new experiment to play out in history. Even after the fall, he allows the rule of Adam and Eve to continue. Man rules man's way and receives the fruit. This fruit proves both that God's word is true, and that Satan was lying.

God wasn't continually holding man in sin, as a punishment, because of one sin. Man made continual choices after the fall, and the results of those choices began to have their impact. The curse wouldn't come automatically, just because of one sin. The curse came as a consequence of

continued behaviour patterns, which built up through ongoing human lifestyles. Man was in captivity to the lies of Satan, and God, rather than being angry, rather than holding man in bondage, had set out to deliver man from this captivity. God had to do this “lawfully,” in time, by not going back on the rule he had given to mankind. It was man who brought about the curse, which spread in its impact, not God.

When man sinned, we saw a God pleading with his creation. God was still walking with Adam and Eve in the Garden. He didn’t separate himself from them. He cried as a parent, “Oh, Adam...” He didn’t punish the creation, but suffered with it. We know what it means to love and have that love rejected. God took this rejection without thinking of himself. He was still only thinking of what was best for us. This is God suffering with us, taking the offence of his creation and not retaliating, but reaching out to us with redemption, rather than giving us the due punishment. We see the same behaviour of God in the Garden, that we see from Jesus on the cross.

We all know our usual take of Genesis. “God punished Adam and Eve because they offended his magisterial rule, or God was inflicting justice upon those who broke his law.” It’s true that God’s holiness was offended. Selfishness causes grief and God hates to see this, because he is love. So yes, his holiness is offended by mankind’s mistreatment of each other. But this isn’t legal anger. It is his suffering with us in grief. His holiness precludes a type of human anger. He doesn’t treat us as we have treated him, or as we have treated others. He wouldn’t be holy if he did. Rather, he treats us with love.

And, of course, there is a kind of legal retribution for our sin. It isn’t one that God inflicts upon us by his own punishments, just to balance some legal books. The legal retribution, is that God must allow us to go our own way. His wrath is expressed along with his suffering. It grieves him, because of our suffering, but he must allow us to have what we wanted: our freedom to do things by our own judgement. His wrath is to give us what we ask for. This is legally required in a sense; it is what love requires.

The point here, is that we must view all scripture through the cross. The cross reveals God. God himself tells us that. So how does the cross reveal God? And how do we see this same God in the early chapters of Genesis? God didn’t behave differently on the cross than he did in Genesis. In Genesis, God was acting by the same love and logic, with which he acted when he died for his creation.

Adam and Eve had separated themselves from God. God had not separated himself from them. And this is what reconciliation is about. The reconciliation is on our side, not God’s side. It is us who need reconciling to God, not God who needs reconciling to us. God was never out of fellowship with us. He was always forgiving, loving and reaching out to us. But we were rejecting him. This is always the case with any parents and their family, at least it should be. Reconciliation is to make our heart right with God. This is what Jesus did for us on the cross. The cross isn’t making an angry God’s heart right with man. The problem was always with man.

The Prodigal Son parable says it all. Here, Jesus was portraying the true God, and all our theology must match up with this. Jesus was bringing the Pharisees into the true picture of who God is.

When the son gave the father one of the greatest offences possible in Eastern culture, immediately, the father wasn’t at all offended in return. Instead of offence, he chose suffering, to love and suffer with his son through the whole experience. The father didn’t punish the son. He brought none of the bad circumstances the son later experienced upon the son. These were all the result of the son’s own actions.

The father had to allow the son to learn for himself. Otherwise, the father would be preventing the son's own growth and maturity. The father looked and waited and longed for the son's return, on a constant basis. Always, the son filled the father's heart, not with the slightest wrath, but with endearment. And when the son returned home, the father put no conditions of return upon the son and demanded no payment for justice. He just loved him and blessed him exceedingly.

This is God. It was God in the Garden; it was God on the cross and it is God today, in our lives, and in our neighbour and enemy's life. If we aren't like this, then we aren't like God.

So, when man sins, we don't see a God who is offended. We see a God still seeking out man in the Garden. The reason why we often see God the wrong way, is because we have "behind the bush theology." We view God from the behind the bush, where Adam and Eve were hiding. They were hiding because of their shame and everything in their thoughts about God was seen through the mirror of this shame.

Adam and Eve saw God as they themselves were, not as he is. This was the main captivity satan brought them into. They couldn't see the God of the cross, caring for them in love, even though they had been so wrong. He didn't count their wrong against them, but immediately forgave them.

We often interpret the early chapters of Genesis through our warped view of God's wrath. We say God cursed Adam and Eve as a punishment for what they did. The reality is that all the curses of the fall came about by our own actions. They all flowed from the way humans began to behave, over the creation in which God had given them charge. God didn't take back this rule from them. They ruled creation, the way they saw fit, so what they did with creation, would bring about the changes in creation that we see happening throughout Genesis.

That is, sin has its own punishment. The punishment is built into sin. Sin brings the punishment upon itself. So God part isn't to destroy. That is already happening. God is trying to step in with mercy. And that is the part of the church; to step in with mercy. Satan and fallen humanity are the accusers; God is the intercessor, the helper, the redeemer, the justifier. God is also judge, but his judgment is that sin will not prosper, but will bear its own fruit of destruction. Otherwise all creation would be destroyed. And this judgment isn't wrath in the human sense, the way we take offense and remember sin, but it is love for and rescue of his creation.

It wouldn't have been right for God to have taken back the rule of creation from Adam and Eve. It wouldn't have been right for God to have punished them because of their sin, just because of his divine honour. This would have proven satan's allegations against him. Satan said God didn't have our best interest at heart, and that he rules unfairly. God didn't stop satan from making this allegation in the Garden. Neither did God stop the consequences. God allows history to see if satan was correct.

If God punished man directly, then we wouldn't have the opportunity to see the truth of satan's argument lived out in the world. Rather, God steps back, allows man to go on, in his own wisdom, to witness what he has himself done, and not what has God has done, to the creation. This is God's freedom, his love, his wrath and his suffering with creation, all working together. And it all proves satan to be a liar.

Take, for example, God driving man out of the Garden. We think that means God drove man out of his presence as a punishment. But the text says that God didn't want man to eat of the tree of life and live for ever, presumably in a fallen condition. So God drove us out in mercy. We know God didn't drive man out in anger, because Paul said God did it in hope, not in anger; in hope that

creation would throw off its corruption, and come into the glorious liberty of the sons of God; i.e., mature, like the Prodigal Son did. (Rom 8:20-21)

And how does God bring about his decrees? He does it through our own human agency. God drove man out of the Garden, to save him. How did he drive man out? Man fled the presence of God, because of his own conscience. This is what drove him away. Even the angel's swords, east of the Garden, can be seen this way. The swords work in our conscience. Our conscience drives us from God. God didn't refuse fallen man; man refused God. God used this to save us all.

The father didn't drive the Prodigal away. The son left his father's house for his own reasons, like Adam left the Garden. The Garden is like God's eternal kingdom. God didn't want Adam to be in his eternal house in his fallen condition, lest he destroy the house for everyone. But Adam left with God's full love. There is no wrath here; there is love for Adam and Eve and also love for the final eternal family God is building.

There is much in this narrative that is difficult to understand in a linear mindset. What is put in the language of "God driving" and "God's wrath," is an Eastern and ancient way of saying that man brought all these consequences upon himself. It isn't literal Western text.

When Cain killed Abel, God told him that the land would no longer yield fruit to him, and that he would be a wanderer. Some have taken this as a punishment upon Cain. Again, it is the fruit of Cain's own actions. He could not stay within his community, tilling the ground, because there was a vengeance sentence against him from the people. Cain would have to flee. He wouldn't be able to settle, but would have to move around in fear of having his life taken. This is why he built a city, which then meant a fortress, for his protection. Cities – the need for self-defence – came about because of what we or our fathers have done to others.

Cain argued that the punishment was too great. God lamented that human vengeance would begin to escalate, because of this murder, and violence would soon be seven times worse. Seeing the violence spread, people would begin to grow in fear of this human vengeance, and this fear would also protect Cain from any that might slay him. God wasn't making a divine sentence against anyone who killed Cain. God was rather forecasting what man would do. Cain's violence would spread, fortresses would multiply through the land, and Cain's brutal way of life would pass onto many others. This is presumably the "mark" God put upon Cain, to protect him. It was Cain's own fearsome countenance.

In none of these things in early Genesis do we see a violent, angry or a punishing God, but a God who suffers with his creation, pleading with them, not forsaking them, while allowing them to go their own way, preparing to come to his creation himself in the flesh, to show us his suffering forgiveness of sin, rather than the vengeance that humans practice so well. All the violence, all the curses, come through our own hearts and actions.

As we noted in an earlier chapter, this violence grows, through Lamech's announcement of seventy-fold revenge, until the Flood approaches, where humanity is violent constantly in all its actions. But our point here is that God is standing back, allowing man to rule as he said, allowing man to rule in his own way, in his own warped sense of legal justice, until the fruit of that kind of justice destroys everything. It wasn't God who destroyed the world in the Flood. It was man, whose violence destroyed humanity and the environment, opening up the natural doors of destruction that swept them away. This was the fruit of satan's temptation, which played out in our history.

In the first six chapters of Genesis we don't see a God punishing people for sin. We see a God who suffers with his creation, pleading, but not interfering. We see humanity left to itself in carrying out its own "wise plans" in ruling God's world. We see God watching, suffering the pain of losing his people, but refusing to be the dictator. We see that sin has its own punishment. It leads to death by itself. And if it isn't checked by mercy, it destroys everything in its path, even the whole of humanity and nature.

After the Flood, we are going to see God take a different tack with human history. He is about to get involved with humanity, to interfere, and lead it towards his redemption, and to his kingdom of mercy. Before the Flood, God was always there to be called upon and he would help. He still is available to all who call upon him. But after the Flood, God's plan, and his involvement with the people of that plan, would be far more interactive.

When God give gifts and callings, he doesn't take them away. He works with us until the purpose of those gifts is realised. He works with humanity until they rule over creation in his image. This is the purpose of his gospel.

Atonement in Modern Society

In this section we trace violence in early society, showing how violence builds in society today. We look at Jesus' teachings and at how they can be applied, in turning this violence around, to build us a new better community.

After the Flood, God's actions concerning the redemption of the world kick in. Man's experiment of "human justice" had failed. It ended in self-destruction. Now it's time for God to become more involved in human affairs. He makes covenant with man, giving God partnership with humanity, to act for our wellbeing. This partnership can't be accused by satan, because it works by faith. It works by people agreeing to believe in God's plan, not being coerced through special treatment. It works through people who desire a better world and who can see God's vision of love and of a good creation.

And God says to Noah that he will not destroy the world again. This means that God can't allow man to go his own destructive way anymore. God must step into human affairs and curtail human violence and destruction, before it does to the world again, what it did in the Flood. Here we have a whole new beginning in human history, but this time, with God taking an active role with humanity through covenant.

This covenant doesn't progress far until God also calls Abraham and he responds by faith, a faith which satan demands to try. Abraham doesn't have to be perfect, but what is tried is his willingness to believe God, ahead of his own interest: the test Adam and Eve failed. God covenants with Abraham's seed to bless the nations of the world. This gives God even more involvement with his creation, as he participates in fallen human affairs.

This still doesn't progress far until Abraham's seed multiplied and also agree to God's plan in Egypt. But satan contests God's participation with these people. He is saying, God doesn't have a right, because of Israel's continued unbelief. This contestation works primarily in Israel's nature, in which their belief in satan's way, self-justice, brings about crises in their national and international relationships, in which vengeance grows and threatens to destroy them. This is where God must step into human affairs and limit these crises. So God adopts their systems of sacrifice, to quell vengeance, to atone for violence within their societies.

We see that if God is going to work through a chosen people, to redeem humanity, and lead them out of their vengeful condition, then he has to manage, or control, that vengeance within that chosen society, so it doesn't lead to their total devastation. God is fulfilling his promise to Noah, to not let them and the world be destroyed again, by managing their destructive behaviour.

We looked at this vengeful condition of humanity in previous chapters of this book. We saw that this is the main condition God has to circumvent in order to bring peace. We are going to look at this condition, and how it works, a bit more closely here. As we saw, we are speaking about humanity's warped sense of justice. This began in the Garden, when man falsely accused God of injustice and then also began accusing each other the same way.

We want to extend this and see that a warped sense of justice governs much of human crime. It doesn't only provoke exaggerated revenge for murder, but it also provokes our actions of greed. People commit crimes, because they have some warped sense that their actions are justified. They claim that they have been wronged in some way and that this justifies their crimes against others. This self-centred justice system, that satan first sowed within the mind of Adam and Eve, permeates the total human condition. There is hardly a crime committed that isn't "self-justifiable." Self-

justification eventually escalates into total carnage. God's actions in Israel, and his actions in the gospel, are aimed at defeating this response in man.

We see that Jesus focuses on this human perspective of justice in his teaching. The Sermon on the Mount calls us to forsake this false sense of justice. Almost all Jesus says is aimed at this human condition. When sued for our coat, we give our shirt. When struck on one cheek we offer the other. When called to go one mile, we go two. When we go to a meeting, we don't take the best seat. We don't seek to give, or to say our prayers in public.

All this calls us against a self-justifying view of justice. The logic of Jesus makes no sense in a world of human justice. It only makes sense in a world of mercy, the mercy which God himself has shown to every one of us on the cross. It is calling us to reflect God, as he truly is. Justice kills, mercy saves. The cross of Christ finally exposed the human heart of vengeance and revealed a kingdom of mercy.

But let's go back and see how human justice began to destroy the world. When I say human justice, remember we mean the false sense of righteousness and law that Satan introduced in the Garden, accusing God of keeping the good things from man. This is self-justification.

When God told Cain he would live in exile, because of his sin, Cain complained it was too much for him. Instead of being sorry, he felt his punishment was unjust. He must have thought Abel was to blame in some way. Cain carried this sense of self-justification with him, when he went off and built his fortresses for his protection.

But in his fortresses, Cain couldn't grow food. He had to go out into the country areas and raid farms. This probably led to more killings. But Cain felt he was justified in doing this. He believed he had been unjustly dealt with by God. His sense of vengeance and personal justice meant he became a thief. Cain's sense of vengeance and self-justification led to all manner of crimes. All of this crime was legally based, in Cain's mind, and this legal base for our actions against others was what Jesus dealt with in the Sermon on the Mount.

This highlights the importance of societal atonement. And this also was a large part of Jesus' teachings. Like when Jesus said, when you go to the temple with your offering and you remember that someone has a fault against you, drop your gift and go and make it right with that person first. This way, we are addressing injustices on the behalf of others, not on the behalf of our self, like taking the log out of our own eye, not out of our neighbour's eye. Addressing injustices, we have caused, is essential to atoning actions in our society. It is essential to interrelationships and peace in our communities.

If we correct other people, other groups, races or faiths, it actually makes them angrier, because of the injustice of it. Correcting others escalates trouble. We mightn't see the injustice, because we don't see our own faults. But when we correct ourselves, then that spreads and others start doing the same. Social atonement doesn't happen through correcting others, but by correcting ourselves. This is what the honour killings were aimed at; a group's self-correction. Honour killings are wrong, but self-correction and apologies are good. This is the most valuable currency in an atoning society.

In societies today, we often settle issues with legal cases in courts. I remember once hearing in Nigeria of a doctor who made a mistake when delivering a baby and the baby died. Later, the doctor went to the house of the mother and father and apologised for his mistake. The parents forgave him. I loved hearing that story. The doctor went and put things right with those people. And when we do this, most people are happy to forgive.

In other societies a doctor would not normally do this. He would be sued if he admitted fault. Therefore, there is no confession of faults and atonements within relationships often don't happen on a personal level. Life becomes professional and legal, not merciful. Where atonement can't be made on the level of caring personal relationships, people feel a sense of growing isolation and injustice. The result of this is bitterness, that permeates the society, until society divides and relationships become harsher. People form groups to address their grievances and these groups further fragment the larger population. Finally, people adopt vengeance and violence, often through politics, trying to get "justice" their own way.

Jesus spoke about the absolute necessity of atonement within society. We must be able to confess our faults to one another and receive forgiveness. If we can put things right with those we have offended, we need to do so. The teachings of Jesus, about loving our neighbour, showing care to the poor and sick, inviting others to our parties, who can't repay us, and showing care to our enemies, are all aimed at bringing atonement to hurts and injustices committed against people in our communities. These are community healing and bonding exercises, that are essential to our common good. Without them, no atonement for wrong is made, and vengeance will erode minds and lead to destructive paths.

In Nigeria, it is often the case that when a Christian has offended a Muslim, we say, "What, shall I apologize to that demon? Aren't they Ishmael, the cause of all our problems? Am I not a child of God?" And we then organise a prayer meeting against "our enemies." This is tearing our societies apart. Unless we are able to go to one another and make things right, when we wrong people, then there will be no atonement in society. There will just be escalating bitterness.

And the offences we are asking forgiveness for aren't just for things we have done wrong. They are also for things we haven't done. Maybe a Muslim neighbour has died and we haven't visited the family, because they aren't of us. This is wrong. We owe every neighbour a duty of care and if we don't show this, we need to go and put things right with our neighbour. If we don't do it, and vengeful attitudes and behaviour grow in our societies, then we can't call it religious fighting. It isn't religious fighting. It is normal bitterness. Jesus told us what to do about this.

I read a story this morning of an Australian retired soldier. He was speaking about Australia's role in Afghanistan. He told of times when Australian soldiers mistakenly killed innocent people. This happens often and is hard to prevent in military conditions. It causes a lot of bitterness and resentment in the nation, to the point that it becomes impossible to bring peace through military means.

The soldier concluded that they couldn't "atone" for the mistakes they had made. It's interesting that he used the word "atone." When nations like Australia and Afghanistan work together, it is necessary that we do so in genuine partnership for the wellbeing of the people, not for our special interest. Soldiers are told they are working for the common good, but often find out in the end this isn't true. This is when atonement within communities become impossible. The result is factions of bitterness take root and destroy the land.

As we saw in a previous chapter, this is exactly the type of bitterness and outcome that the Law of Moses was trying to avert in Israel. This is what *charam* was for, in the founding of their nation. It was to bring atonement for crimes committed, to restore the balance of trust and cut off human bitterness and bloodlust.

These laws were not because God wished to punish people, but to cut off the build-up of resentment and human forms of "justice" and violence that would result. It wasn't just *charam* that

Moses legislated, but also just treatment of others, which cuts off the need for *charam*. God doesn't want *charam*, sacrifice. He wants mercy and justice for our neighbour.

This is why Jesus taught so much about social atonement, dealing with our neighbour in a merciful and loving way. Jesus didn't speak of atonement in the violent ways of the Old Testament, not about capital punishment. He spoke of atonement in terms of free forgiveness, because we have been forgiven, and of acts of kindness towards people we may consider to be our enemies. Jesus said that such acts of atonement are essential for making and keeping peace in human relationships, for building the type of Promised Land God spoke of.

I heard of an Islamic teaching that says we should love our neighbour 40 houses to our north, 40 houses to our south, 40 houses to our east and 40 houses to our west. This is symbolic of a far distance. It doesn't stop at the 41st house. And it said that we should know the name of at least one person in each house. And it didn't matter who lived in these houses, someone of our faith, or our race, or otherwise. This is similar to what Jesus taught about "who is our neighbour?" This teaching is speaking of atonement.

If we love our neighbour we make atonement for the general wrong that people have experienced throughout their lives in different ways. Through common courtesy and support, we bring down levels of bitterness, vengeance, and "justice" fuelled crimes, in our nations. It is very simple.

Moving to Restorative Justice

When God formed Israel as a nation, he worked immediately to stem the level of violence. The formation of Israel was aimed at providing a model of an anti-empire. All powers in the world followed the model of Egypt. This began before the Flood, and the leaders of these empires were called the men of renown, or giants, which meant oppressive rulers.

They were like Pharaoh, who kept all as slaves and led with the brute power of armies. The policies of Pharaoh centred all power in his hands, including economic power, which occurred during the years of famine. In those seven years, all people in Egypt became slaves of Pharaoh, from the top to the bottom of Egypt. We haven't made much progress today, when a handful of people in the world own a very large portion of the world's wealth.

God gave Israel laws of Jubilee, meaning wealth must be used to build the lives of all the people in the land. Immediately the law works against Pharaoh's type of rule. Israel was to be a de-Pharaohing influence, salt and light, in a new kind of nationhood.

Next, God gave Israel several laws about their militia. It wasn't to be anything like the militia of the empires. Firstly, they were not to have a king. Instead of one man taking the rule, rule was to be shared. All God's people were created in his image. And they were not to be subjugated by a central power. If they had a king, he wasn't to take many wives, as oppressive kings always did, before and after the Flood. Women are equally made in the image of God. Second, Israel was not permitted to have a standing army. People were permitted to help in times of defence, but no army was to be kept and trained. Thirdly, Israel were not permitted to build fortresses, and were not permitted to keep horses for war.

Their strategy for defence was to be their trust in God and their merciful and caring treatment of people in their nations and foreigners. In other words, this overall sense of the law wasn't much different to the Sermon on the Mount. Justice for others, rather than self-justice, was to be Israel's power. This was how nations were meant to behave and renew the world. By the time we get to Solomon, all these laws are systematically ignored and disobeyed. Solomon built another Egypt.

Israel is God's first major attempt to change the world, to move man out of his vengeful behaviour of destruction. God set up laws of atonement within the society. These included the sacrifices, which can atone for sins and take away guilt from within the community, but also laws that atone for crimes in other ways.

The major crimes that break up our communities, are those of greed and neglect of other people's needs. The law was directed at these behaviours, to atone for them, by leading Israel into a new type of behaviour that sought justice for others, instead of for self. The law couldn't do this fully, because of the hardness of Israel's heart, but at least the law could provide a witness, which the Prophets later emphasised, and which Jesus made prominent in his ministry.

So laws were given to care for the poor, to care for refugees, to care for widows and orphans, to love our enemies. All these laws put the interest of people above the interest of power or state. The law shows us that this is the only way to secure the nation. The law witnesses that the true way to peace, isn't the fortresses that Cain and Pharaoh built, but laying down our lives to provide justice to others. No power can provide peace. Only fairness, atoning for sins of injustice against the people, can produce peace. This is the main witness of the law and the Prophets, and in this way they point to Christ, the Prince of Peace.

Not only were these laws given, but God intended that the nation keep these laws, and this is why he gave the office of the Prophets. God said their survival as a nation would depend on how they cared for others, whether fellows Israelites, or foreigners. He said that if they failed to care for others, it would produce a hostility and bloodlust within their community, and within their neighbouring nations, that would destroy Israel. And this is what finally happened.

These laws were often given in the context of idolatry. If Israel followed the other gods, they would descend into corruption and destruction. If they followed the true God, they would have a heart to serve and deliver their nation from violence. If they love God with all their heart, then they would love their neighbour, whoever that person is, as themselves. This was their peace plan.

We can see clearly in the law, the ultimate plan of God for peace. It isn't sacrifice, but mercy and love for others. We can see God's ultimate plan for atonement, that heals and binds society together in love; it isn't sacrifice, but mercy and justice for others. This is what atonement for anger and grievances means. This is what Israel's sacrifice systems pointed to, though Israel didn't perceive this until Jesus taught. Even though the Prophets said this, they didn't hear.

To say that these sacrifices only point us to Christ and his cross, but not to the life that Christ lived and taught, is to miss their point. The cross isn't just the place where our atonement with God is provided, but the place where our atonement with each other is provided. That is, if we take up our cross and live the life Jesus calls us to, in his teachings, then we will have peace with our neighbour. We can come out of our fortresses that Cain built and live with one another. Sacrifice points to us putting things right with our neighbour and with our enemy, at our own cost. That is the sacrifice.

God shows us what this law is pointing to: The kingdom of Peace through Christ. This shows us God's overall purpose in covenanting with Noah and Abraham, to rid the world of violence, to renew the earth. It isn't just that God would spiritually redeem humanity through the gospel. It isn't that God would justify us and take us to heaven. It is that God would bring peace upon earth, just as the angels said, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." The purpose of justification is to bind us together in a common faith, so that we might build peace together.

"For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the Lord of Heaven's Armies will make this happen!" (Isaiah 9:6-7)

The armies of the Lord are armies that bring peace, not through military war, but through counsel, and caring government, within our redeemed new natures. The purpose of the gospel is to establish peace in the earth, and that this peace shall grow and spread until it rules over all the nations. This is the theme that Isaiah develops throughout his writings. "The whole earth is full of his glory." We can't say this while oppression and injustice rule over most of the world's populations.

For long, we have separated the gospel message from the care for others, which Isaiah says Christ's kingdom is all about. For long, we have separated the gospel from this global plan of God, to bring just rule to our hearts and nations. We have come to the point that we don't recognize the gospel message of the Prophets.

Isaiah, taken as a whole, is a picture of the tyrant and violent kingdoms of Syria, Israel, Assyria, Babylon and Rome. These are depicted by the raging rivers, thrashing out unrest, covetousness, turbulence and destruction, overflowing their banks to destroy all around them. (Isaiah 8:7)

The Messiah, in contrast, is depicted by the still waters of Siloam. (Isaiah 8:6). Israel rejects these peaceful waters. They have taken on the ways of the nations, they emulate empire, rather than the peaceful acts of care for people. They tread under foot those who suffer, instead of ministering to their hurt. The motivation behind violence is covetousness. Creation is destroyed as people desire more and more and consume and destroy all that is before them to obtain it. These are the empires of the world, the beast, of which Israel was a part.

Let's make a link between this and our nations today, just to make sure the point is clear. There is a battle going on in Western nations about whether to retreat into Fascism. For years the West has exploited the nations of the world, and when it gets too tough for people in those nations, and so many of them become refugees, we then want to close our doors, cut off aid to them and become nationalistic. Hitler's way is not our way. We are Christians, which means we follow Christ, even if, or especially when, that conflicts with our personal values, or the values of our nation.

This link is a direct application of the very same point Isaiah was making to Israel in his era. Babylon was decimating the region, and many of Israel's former enemies were being displaced and had become wandering refugees. In some passages, Isaiah was warning Israel to care for these people, even though they were enemies, who posed all the same threats as "enemies" in need today may pose to us. The duty of care was paramount to God. In other passages, Isaiah was saying the same to the other nations. They must treat each other with care, and not neglect their enemies, when they fell into unfortunate circumstances.

Here is an example: "Defend us against our enemies. Protect us from their relentless attack. Do not betray us now that we have escaped. Let our refugees stay among you. Hide them from our enemies until the terror is past." (Isaiah 16:3-4) A more poetic translation is in the KJV: "Take counsel, execute judgment; make thy shadow as the night in the midst of the noonday; hide the outcasts; bewray not him that wandereth. Let mine outcasts dwell with thee."

Judgment here, is not seen as prosecuting the one in need, but giving them mercy. It isn't judging them unworthy of care. God tells us to cast a thick shadow over those who languish in the midday sun. What a beautiful metaphor. God says that refugees belong to him, just because they need care, and this is regardless of their creed or nationality.

And this would include protecting people from enemies of any kind, that produce suffering in any way, whether military, economic, colonial devastation, corruption, or other catastrophes. God said it clearly: we are not to put our personal or national interest above our duty of care, or above decent human hospitality. If we can't show such a universal common grace, as hospitality, to any neighbour, then we don't have a faith to share, or that is worthy to protect.

Isaiah depicts Messiah's kingdom as a complete contrast to the self-interest of our nations. And more than this, Isaiah shows us that it is the casting off of this self-interest, through the new heart, that transforms our world. Isaiah gives many metaphors of a transformed world, including flowers blossoming, the desert, weeds and thistles giving way to flourishing land, and wild animals eating straw in harmony. These literally come to pass in a renewed world, but they are also figures of our common, even if hidden, beastly covetousness being transformed.

The world is transformed by a new way of living with our neighbour, and this is something that the gospel produces in our nations. The problem is that we often don't see the gospel in this way. We have seen it as a way of prosecuting the wayward, and even executing more violence and displacement against them. Our history is full of this type of false gospel, and it is commonly held today.

The way the world is transformed is portrayed in Isaiah 32:1-2, "Look, a righteous king is coming! And honest princes will rule under him. Each one will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm, like streams of water in the desert and the shadow of a great rock in a parched land."

This isn't just about the second coming of Christ, but the incarnation, the coming of the gospel into the world. It is a kingdom of mercy, not sacrifice; of care, not vengeance. He raises up a people like himself, who take his mercy to those in need, producing a new type of justice and judgement in the world. This is a picture of the church, which rather than joining the nations in their vengeance upon others, takes a new path of hospital care for the suffering, including for our enemy. The church is famous for founding the hospital. This hospital is also a metaphor for the church. Here, there is a separation between church and state. We don't join the state in its wrath upon the people.

The mountain top of God's revelation to a fallen and violent world is in Isaiah 32:17, "And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever." Here, Israel is threatened by nations all around them. Their kings rush to build more fortresses and gather arms for the battles ahead. Their national security is in their military and in their military alliances with other nations. This is just plain world logic. No one would deny it. They cut back further on aid to the poor, the sick, the homeless, the refugee, so they can build arms and prepare for the protection of their nation. This is just plain natural sense, and most people would agree with it.

But to God, this nation is doing the exact opposite to what will give them security. Wars come because people don't get justice. The people are not cared for. So they fight for what they need. This is the propaganda through their nations. Their leaders tell them that if they don't fight, they will get nothing. And this is believed. Why is it believed? Because the poor aren't being cared for. The nations aren't looking after the needs of others, but they look after themselves. And when threats come our way, we do this even more.

Isaiah 32:1, above, isn't first a gospel prophecy. It is Isaiah's call to the Israel of his era. "If you want security and protection for the nation, then care for the people in need." This is also said very directly in Isaiah 58, "The fast (faith) that God has chosen." It is sharing our bread with those in need and helping all people who fall down in the nations. Isaiah said there, that when we do this, our national security and peace will blossom with ease.

Its unfathomable that we have missed this plain message of God. With this message, God begins to turn the whole world from its violence and vengeance after the fall, and from its whole history of violence before and after the Flood. Through Israel, God begins to reveal his path of peace. This is in the law, but the Prophets herald this message with such clarity, over and over again. This is the one message the Prophets take out of the law and amplify. This is the heart and path of God.

When looking at Isaiah 32:17, we have often taken it so wrongly. Because the word "righteousness" is used, we have often taken it to mean gospel, imputed righteousness, by faith: "If we accept Jesus then we will have imputed righteousness and peace with God." This isn't what Isaiah was saying here. This is our common individualistic way of interpreting the Bible message. Rather, Isaiah had a message about community. The root word for righteousness here is the same word as for justice.

The message of Isaiah to Israel is plain. If they act in a way of justice towards those in need, rather than building up and trusting in their military, then their care for the people and for the nations around them will lead to peace in their world.

God is showing us how to get peace in our world. It is through atonement. But not the atonement of *charam*, or killing, or vengeance, or of sacrifice, but of care for those who need care. This atones for hurt and wounds in our societies, reduces levels of bitterness and propaganda, and brings about a new ethic of mercy instead of wrath. God is turning the nations from *charam* to mercy. But will the nations hear? Israel didn't. Still they didn't hear, when Jesus spelled it out. Still, the church didn't hear it through much of our history. At times we have. Its time now that we hear it again.

So often, we the church look to other issues, like abortion and sexual morality, when these aren't the base of our problems. When Ezekiel was describing the sin of Sodom, he didn't start with the sexual issues. He started with greed, with lack of hospitality for their neighbours, with their not caring for others. (Ezekiel 16:49) This eroded their heart, brought in a hardness of heart, from which all the other self-destroying sins came. These secondary sins are our self-destruction. They come from our hardness of heart. And the hardness of heart comes from our lack of care for others. It is care for others that is the root.

When we care for people, God gives us grace for our communities. We begin to find answers to our problems, that we didn't see before. When we care for others, when we live less selfish lives, then we begin to behave in a more caring way in our own marriages, in sexual issues, in issues like abortion and environment. We aren't caring for our self anymore.

A caring heart makes us more caring and less self-seeking in all moral areas. This new logic, life style is our witness to our nation. A key is, instead of objecting to these practices in other people's lives, object with an unmaterialistic life style, in helping these people. People who fall into harmful life styles need help. The opposite of immortality isn't legal morality, but love.

All violence in the scriptures is human. It is the violence of greed, of separation from others, and thinking of self, of nationalism, of corruption. This is all as violent as war itself. All it all impoverishes, kills and attacks the image of God in people. God has been moving us from our self-centred kingdoms to his kingdom, in which the whole logic is opposite. The way to find life is to lose it, to care for others and not ourselves.

Rene Girard brilliantly puts the history of humanity like this:

"The Jewish texts, starting with Cain and Abel, gradually dissociate the divinity from participation in the violence until, in the New Testament, God is entirely set free from participation in our violence... and indeed God is revealed not as the one who expels us, but the One whom we expel, and who allowed himself to be expelled so as to make of his expulsion a revelation of what he is really like, and of what we really, typically do to each other, so that we can begin to learn to get beyond this."

We see God meeting with humanity where we are, and drawing us forward to the values of his eternal kingdom. This isn't simple. We started so far from him, so entrenched in our own guilt and self-justification, that it was impossible to see God for who is really is. We have looked at the scripture from our perspective, as though God was rejecting us, casting us out of the Garden, but all the while it was us rejecting him, casting him out of the camp and crucifying him outside the holy city.

But this suited God, as Girard noted, because when we expelled God, it enabled us to see him for who he really is, and enabled us also to see ourselves, as rejecters of God and rejecters of the weak, sick and persecuted. We saw God in his forgiving and loving nature, not retaliating or recompensing. We saw God's love for his creation, allowing us to humiliate him, if that would set us free.

And this is what did set us free. When we heard him say he forgives us, we saw our violence. We saw what we do to our neighbour and enemy, even unjustly, even when they do not deserve it. We saw our justice system, that it was bankrupt of any truth. It crucifies the innocent, and the bystanders do nothing to help. We saw that everyman looks after himself. But beyond that, we saw grace. We saw that God accepts us in this sin, that he is not angry with, that he invites home: "Today you will be with me in paradise," back to the Garden, back into the family and presence of God.

So this grace energises us. We start new lives, saying, "If God, the creator of all things, the one I have caused so much suffering to, in so many ways, has forgiven me, and called me his child, then I can treat others that way. In fact, who am I not to follow God this way? Now that I see who he is, and hear his call to follow him," I can extend grace to those around me, instead of vengeance.

The cross and resurrection of Christ energises a whole new community, which begins to spread this new form of justice, restorative justice, not vengeance, into the communities and nations. This spreads like leaven in dough, until the whole lump, the whole world, is filled with the glory, the suffering love and restoration, of Gods Spirit.

A part of the lesson in Jesus' teaching in the parable of the Good Samaritan is about sacrifice. The priest was on his way to Jerusalem, for his roster in officiating sacrifices at the temple. It was said that these sacrifices cleanse the nation of evil; that they removed evil from their consciousness and from society. This was the view in the Old Testament; that sin must be punished. This punishment would carry away the evil. If people shouldn't be punished all the time, at least we could transfer that punishment to animals, to serve for us as substitutes. We could punish the animals instead. This was the idea of sacrifice then. This was decidedly a human view, not God's view, and this is what Jesus showed in this parable, and it wouldn't have been received all that well.

Jesus turned this human view of God upside down in this parable. It was the Samaritan who atoned for evil. He poured the oil and wine into the wounds of the man abandoned on the road. This was medicinal, but the point Jesus was making was also about Israel's view of sacrifice and how utterly unhelpful it was to humanity. The oil and wine were also part of the Old Testament sacrifices. Jesus was contrasting the Samaritan's way of sacrificing with the priests' way of sacrificing. It isn't punishment of sin that takes evil away from our society, but serving the effects of that evil in suffering humanity, whether they be friend or enemy. This atones for evil in our social networks. This is what Old Testament sacrifice points us to; serving the widow and orphan.

It was the Samaritan who took away the evil, that day, on the road to Jericho, not the priest making sacrifice at the temple. The temple sacrifice removed no evil at all. It was just a shadow of the lives God has called us to.

The Tower of Babel & Community

There are so many texts in the scripture that we use to support nationalism, separation from those different to us, rather than loving our neighbour. All these ideas were around in the days of Jesus, when he taught, and they are just as much around in our Christian circles today. Jesus taught community (the kingdom of God) and the same powers against community today came out against Jesus then. The issue was self, one's own group, or community.

One example is from Genesis 11, when the nations were scattered. We are often told that God scattered the nations because he doesn't believe in unity and that God supports division, breakup of communities and nationalism. We are told that God works through nations to save the world, "especially through our nation." For this reason, it is said, we need to stand against, or even war against, other nations. But everyone has always thought this, no matter what religion they are from. They have always thought this about their own nation. This isn't really a religious belief, but a self-centred belief from our own human nature, that we support by an appeal to our religion.

Then you hear about all the end-times, global government, conspiracy theories, and these theories are used as excuses for us to not care for others, but to shun them, or even hate them. The "conspiracy" I pay attention to is the one in Isaiah, and in the Psalms, which says that Christ shall rule the world. So there is one united world in God's kingdom, and we are part of that kingdom now. This is how we treat our world, without dividing it. We live by the logic of Messiah's eternal kingdom, loving neighbour, not the logic of satanic community destruction. The church is a witness to God's eternal values, pushing through darkness into our lives today, into our current relationships. Christ's government doesn't work through conspiracy, but through love of neighbour.

People will argue, saying there are two worlds; God's and satan's, and that some people are on one side and other people are on the other side. Then we are told that we must keep these others at arm's length, and deal with them in a negative manner. And, it is said, that any act of reconciliation towards these people, is an act of compromise, or yielding to the antichrist, rather than treating our enemies as Jesus told us to. This is trying to overcome satan, satan's way. If satan has made two worlds, through division and hatred, what do we do about that? We do the opposite. We remake God's world through laying down our lives and by service of neighbour. We overcome evil with good. We don't continue in satan's division, and shunning of neighbour, to do God's will.

Gen 11 is often used as an excuse to live non-community building lives. Some would say, "How can we build community with our enemies?" This is what Jesus taught about. The Sermon on the Mount is full of this type of teaching. We are to love our enemies, forgive others, and lastly, take up our cross to serve them; put community ahead of our own lives and interest. If everyone did that, we would have community. If Christians led the way in doing this, we would be the witness we are supposed to be. Let's not use Gen 11 an excuse for us to develop anti-community lives.

If the church is looking for the reason for its decline, then this way we have developed of treating other people is the reason. Gen 11 is one of those texts where a wrong reading has become a stronghold in our thinking. Our lives need to change.

When we read Gen 11, in the sense in which the ancient text was written, it reveals a whole different story. The rulers of the world were behaving just like they did before the Flood. They were oppressing and making slaves of all the people, like Pharaoh did later. They had all the people in massive servitude, breaking God's intention for humanity at creation: he made us all in the image of God, not to be made robots of an empire. It was for this reason that God broke them up.

Other explanations claim that it was because of their witchcraft. They say the people were trying to overthrow God. All this was in the mix, but the real issue was just like Pharaoh later said: "How can we use all these Jewish people? Let's make them slaves and put them to work on our towers, so we can make a name for ourselves, and increase our personal power. If we are not wise, they will scatter and we will lose them."

The outcome was massive slavery over all the people, for the sake of the power of the rulers. This is what God "came down" to stop, just as he did in Pharaoh's day, saying, "I have heard the cry of the people." God's statement, "nothing shall be impossible to them", was about oppression filling the earth. It's not that God doesn't want global community, but that he doesn't want it on the basis of oppression.

So God's heavenly court decreed that the power would break up. Ok, so how did this breakup happen? It happened the same way it happens today. When people are suffering under oppression, they start speaking different languages; they start rebelling against the leaders and start forming factions among themselves. These factions eventually form into armies and the empire breaks up through civil war. The groups then disperse, developing their different language and cultural identities.

This happens in our own time; corruption at the top causes the people to break up into tribes. This is what broke Israel in two kingdoms; because Saul was building a Benjaminite empire, and Solomon was building a Judaic empire. Solomon said, "Go to, let us make a name for our ourselves by building this or that." And this, of course, required slaves. Then Solomon's son said, "My little finger shall be thicker than my father's waist," meaning that his oppression of the people would be much worse than Solomon's. That was the end of that kingdom.

Some say that God acted in Gen 11 in order to force the people to spread over the whole earth, in line with his commission to Adam and Eve to fill the earth. This isn't the focus of the story. The focus is what brings breakdown of human order. It is oppression that shatters community. Our world today is divided because of oppression, because of empire building. This is what scatters us, not religion. It is Satan who breaks up our unity, not God. Satan scatters the world by sowing mistreatment of others in our hearts as leaders, and this encourages hatred in everyone else's heart. This is why we have terrorism today, not because of religion.

In Isaiah we see one global rule of Christ, over all people and nations. We see unity. We see Satan being overcome, his plans to divide and conquer humanity, just like politicians do, defeated. And how do we see this unity rule of Messiah succeed? It succeeds through service and care of all people. God has called us to live lives of service, so that any breakdown of community, locally or globally, will not come from us. Christ's kingdom of world rule succeeds precisely because it operates oppositely to the kingdoms in Genesis. They operated through oppression. Christ's kingdom operates through love and serving others.

So God isn't against unity and he isn't on the side of division, breakdown of community and nationalism. He isn't for the division that puts one people against another and one nation at war against all. This isn't from God. This is from Satan. God is for peace. He is for our love for all others, no matter their nation, race or religion.

We see this in Pentecost, when Christ's kingdom was born. It united all nations into one community. This is God's will, and it can be achieved through Christ's kingdom, because in Christ's kingdom we receive a new heart. This doesn't mean we don't celebrate people's different cultural identities. We

do celebrate them. When we are not building empire we have no reason to make each other conform.

The logic that seeks to divide us today, on the basis of the story in Gen 11, is false. It is satanic logic. It is not the Spirit of God and not God's intention for how we should treat our neighbour. God has decreed that global oppression will break up: those empires will not succeed and inherit his eternal blessing in the world. The seed of destruction is already within the logic of how these empires rule. They will self-destruct. Only Christ's kingdom will succeed over the world, because his kingdom is for the benefit of all of God's people. The seed of flourishing community is already within the very nature of Christ's rule, and this is why it is blessed with eternal cohesion.

So if someone calls you antichrist, or unpatriotic, because you love our enemies, and you refuse to scapegoat and separate from people of other faiths or nations, don't worry, that is the kind of thing they called Jesus, and for the same reason.

Violence in the Psalms

The Psalms is another area from where we often take texts from to allow Christian violence. But the question remains again. Why didn't Jesus interpret the Psalms this way? Why don't we see Jesus take up violence, if the Psalms allowed and in some ways promoted it? If Jesus shows us the true and full image of God, why then do the Psalms speak of violence? Is the image of Jesus in the Gospels, not his true image? Does his image change after the resurrection, back into a vengeful, violent punisher of sin, even though in the Gospels he refuted that spirit in his disciples?

These question must be answered from the Jesus of the Gospels, from the things that he actually taught; as God said, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him." He is the word of God, meaning his life and message in the Gospels is God's final and accurate word to us. We don't water that down with "God's word" from other texts. Rather, we interpret the other texts through the Jesus of the Gospels.

We have often jokingly said to our Bible College students, that for the first year of their studies we will only allow them to have the Gospels. "Spend one year studying only Jesus, what he said, and what he did. Make sure we get that and discuss that very well, and understand God only from Jesus' perspective, and make sure that we start putting what he told us into practice, in our relationships with everyone in our close and wider communities." This is what God told us to do. Then, only after we have been orientated properly to Jesus, do we bring the other scriptures in and read them. Now we are interpreting the other texts through the eyes of Jesus, and not through the eyes of our own cultures.

What about the Psalms, that speak of Christ's kingdom taking over the world through violence?

"You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." (Psalm 2:9)

There is a lot going on here. First, the language depicts the complete victory of Christ over the forces of darkness within the gentile nations. This victory is described using the language of the time, which the Psalms were written in. It is an absolute victory. The same victory is described in Daniel 2, where the stone from heaven smites the image of the gentile powers on the feet and it crumbles to dust, while the stone grows into a mountain and fills the entire earth.

When Jesus came, the Jewish people then were largely expecting the Messiah to overrun their enemies in exactly this way. They assumed these prophecies would be literally fulfilled by physical violence. The ministry of Jesus shows us that they misinterpreted these prophecies completely. So, if we interpret these prophecies violently, we are also misinterpreting them in exactly the same way.

Jesus turned these prophecies unexpectedly on their head, so that he would take the crushing of the gentile nations himself. Isaiah predicted he would do this, in chapters 52-54. He would be crushed by humanity. The violence of these prophecies would be carried out by humanity, and not by God at all.

The conquest of the nations, of the satanic principle working in all those nations, would be achieved through the violence of those nations, and not by the violence of the Messiah. Violence against the Messiah would expose the injustice of these powers and bring about a renewed heart in the people. This renewal would extent through the world, conquering the old way of life as it spreads.

Conquest language was also commonly used by Paul. This is the great subversion of the scripture. It uses language of victory to subvert the worldly victor. It turns out that the one who loses, in the world's estimation, is the winner. In Colossians, Jesus was stripped naked, and died on the cross, but in submitting to this, he stripped the worldly powers naked of their false justice and false claims of

religion. If we saw a prophecy in Psalms saying, “He will strip the powers naked,” you wouldn’t expect that to be fulfilled by the cross.

Often we see an artist’s impression of Paul’s “armour of God” in Ephesians, where a Roman soldier stands with his usual equipment. But Paul wasn’t thinking of that impression at all. The helmet is salvation, not a steel head covering. Paul’s image completely subverts the soldier’s dress and looks nothing at all like it. He subverts the whole issue of fighting in our minds. Fighting, is the Christian’s walk in the love of God. The scripture adopts war language to overthrow war entirely.

Paul shows in Ephesians, that the new heart in Christ has conquered Old Testament violence, where he says that the cross reconciled former enemies. With this new heart, Jews and Gentiles have now become one in faith and love. This has conquered the enmity, or the enemies of the Jews, just as God promised in the Old Testament. But the conquering was achieved through reconciliation, not through destroying the racial enemies. That is, the enemy was within our hearts, all of our hearts, Jewish and gentile hearts. This enmity, this alienation from God and from each other, was destroyed by Jesus on the cross, when he forgave us our sins. He conquered our enemies by reconciling us to each other.

This is how God expects us to go about conquering our enemies, and overcoming our challenges in the world; not through power struggles, not the world’s way. It is clear that God’s kingdom is not of this world, meaning that it doesn’t employ worldly ways in renewing the nations. God expects us to renew our enemies, and meet our challenges, by being servants of reconciliation, following our God and not the other god.

Paul noted in Ephesians 2, that Jew and gentile have now been forged into one new house, the household of faith. Here, Paul speaks of a new building. In the Old Testament, crushed potter’s vessels were used as part of a cement mixture, to hold the bricks together in their new houses. The cement mixture was very strong. So by being crushed, and coming to live in our new hearts, he becomes the cement that binds former enemies together in an unbreakable bond of love. The old enmity between Jew and gentile has been completely overcome and defeated by God. This shows us how we should fight in this world; the same way God did; through acts of reconciliation.

Let’s bring a similar text in from Isaiah here: “But with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.” (Isaiah 11:4)

This passage speaks of God’s judgment renewing the earth. It is a judgment of mercy and salvation to the poor. God does this through the rod of his mouth, which is his word. His word renews our heart. His Spirit gives us new birth. By this, we renew our communities, so that the poor of our nations are served and find mercy. It is his word that slays wickedness in our hearts.

This shows us how God fights. It is creation language, as we see in Genesis 1. God’s word and lips, which formed light out of darkness, and goodness out of disorder, forms a new mercy for the world through a new creation in the hearts of his people. This isn’t justice through punishment, but justice through mercy to those trodden down. The vision is of a justice that comes through new actions; whereas the old actions crippled people, the new actions restore people. This salvation, this renewing of the world, is “the hope of righteous” that the church is bringing to the nations through its cross life community. (Galatians 5:5)

“I will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers.” (Psalm 89:25)

This beautiful Psalm shows how God defeats the evil in the world. His king will rule with mercy for the poor. His word will renew our hearts. In this way he quells the raging torrents of covetousness in our nations, thereby “crushing” through reconciliation the injustice and violence. He stills the waters of human vengeance and the powers of gentile military greed.

He brings justice to the world by lifting up the poor, the ones the world powers tread down. He does this by renewing our hearts and sending us into the world as his servants.

“He will judge the poor of the people. He will save the children of the needy, and will break the oppressor in pieces... He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, from the River to the ends of the earth.” (Psalm 72:4, 8)

This dominion from sea to sea speaks of all the world, but also of the renewed waters of turbulent, covetousness human nature. In renewing this nature, God subdues every enemy under Christ and renews the world. He destroys the oppressor by reconciling him, changing his inner man, and this effectively taking the oppressor out of our way.

This also involves us knowing how to make peace with our enemies, taking up God’s new reconciling lifestyle: “When a man’s ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be a peace (at one) with him.” “He prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies.” This means we eat together in reconciliation. The phrase, in the “presence” of my enemy, uses a similar Hebrew word as was used for Eve who she became a helper to Adam. This is how God unites us in Christ.

“Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law.” (Isaiah 42:1-4)

This is how God brings justice to the world. He does it through his servants. The form of justice he is bringing is mercy to the weak. He doesn’t come in a rage and destroy the wicked. He ministers to the weak of the nations. This is what Jesus did through the Gospels, and this is what he sends his church into the world to do, as a different type of community to the greed around us.

The church should not be discouraged in taking up our cross and serving, until the ends of the earth are transformed. We are among those who don’t break the bruised person, or judge and put out the one with a faint light, but we work with Christ to restore. Justice for the sufferer is brought forth by a God who acts in this healing way, not giving the person his legal due, but mercy.

These prophecies do have a destructive side. But it isn’t God who does the destruction. It says God does it, but this is in the language of his sovereignty, not of his personal violence. God has judged that only the meek of the earth will inherit the kingdom, and this means that the violent will self-destruct. It just means he removes his grace. That is all he needs to do. The seeds of destruction are already inherent within the violence. He destroys wickedness by forbidding it his grace. That is all that is required for his part. He neither motivates nor carries out the slightest bit of the violence. The only other thing he does is to set about saving the meek, in this life, or in the life to come.

All other kings kill people to maintain peace in their kingdoms. Every religion uses violence to protect itself, but we have a King who did not build his kingdom with the blood of men. He did not protect his interest, but he gave his life for his enemies. He rode on a donkey, symbolising peace. He lived peace and he preached peace. By doing this, he conquered the enemy (sin, the devil, and death). Finally, he commanded us to follow his steps. Jesus; the Prince of Peace!

There are also the Psalms that call for God's destruction of our enemies. These are mostly by David. Firstly, David isn't Jesus. He was a man. He was an imperfect man. He had many faults, just like we do, as we know. So, we don't take his Psalms as the perfect representation of the will of God.

Secondly, many of the Psalms are lamentations, where, in Hebrew style literature, the writer is grieving over his problems. Lamentations generally start off with the problem and then end up with praise. In between they offer all kinds of human responses of anger and frustration. The people who wrote the Psalms were humans, and God didn't expect them to bottle up their emotions.

Psalms were an opportunity for the people to air their human views. There is nothing wrong with doing this. But the Psalms invariably end up with Messianic predictions of victory. The writers often couldn't quite understand how this victory would come. They could only see the Messiah in terms of how they would do things. They didn't know he would take this conquest by his own sufferings, rather than the sufferings of others.

Then there are Psalms that include verses like this one below:

"How blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones against the rock." (Psalm 137:9)

How many times has the state church used this text to march out against its enemies? It used this verse to slay children in the Crusades, when the Muslims refused such barbarity. You see, the Bible, taken at face value, is every bit as violent as the Quran, if not more so. But we don't take it at face value. However, we still have pockets of violence in our theology that can still be very destructive, especially in our national activities. Why then, if we still stumble to understand our own texts, do we so quickly say we understand and are able to judge the Quran?

The above verse is taken from a lamentation Psalm. It was written from the Jew's captivity in Babylon. They wept by the rivers of Babylon and lamented on their captivity in a strange land. The Psalm uses common Hebrew poetic devices, such as personification. Babylon is called the daughter of Babylon, like a young lady growing into adulthood and influence in the world. Her little ones are her soldiers, the army that destroyed Jerusalem and carried away the Jews as captives.

This Psalm is definitely not speaking of infanticide. But neither is it speaking of revenge upon the army of Babylon. It is just lamenting. It is said in extreme grief. There is no literal intent by the author to have revenge against all the soldiers. It is only said to help them carry away their tears. It is just a human response to their pain. This is what the Psalms were written for. This is very common in such cultures. They don't have the Western "stiff upper lip." Again, we shouldn't interpret Eastern texts by our own cultural views.

The Psalms cannot be taken as an excuse for violence. When read through Christ and his redeeming work, the Psalms carry no call to the church to violence, in any respect. Rather, they speak to us of the opposite. They show that Christ conquers violence by renewing us with his word, and bringing us to the place where we will carry the sin of the world as servants, responding with mercy and service, like he did, rather than react against violence with violence. The Psalms show that it is violence itself that Christ conquers. This was the problem David faced more than anything, and which he lamented about, and this is what God solved forever through the work of his Son. He has taken violence out of our hearts, answering David's prayer for help and deliverance.

Jesus & Self-Defence

We often approach Jesus in the Gospels from our personal perspective, with questions such as whether we are allowed to act in self-defence. We discuss the statements of Jesus on this level; “If an attacker is coming to my house, aren’t I allowed to defend myself, my wife and children?”

Sometimes, the whole discussion on “pacifism” is prevented at this point. Those who would hesitate at this question of violently protecting others are silenced from further discussion. From this point, people extrapolate on the use of violence to support gross acts from their governments against other people, whether economic or military, in the name of the safety of “our families,” forgetting that so many other families are perishing.

We won’t find much in Jesus’ statements directly answering this question about our personal protection. Jesus wasn’t addressing this issue. He wasn’t speaking about our concerns for self-defence. The statements Jesus made about violence were made in the context of his new kingdom, coming to transform the world. Often, we don’t read the scripture in this context. We don’t think of this kingdom, or of the purpose of Jesus for this kingdom in our nations. We have let this number one aspect of the gospel message slip into the background and disappear.

When we read the Gospels we are still thinking about our personal lives, and how we can be safe in this world and defend our way of life. Jesus wasn’t speaking of this, so he wasn’t answering the questions we are asking about this today. He wasn’t speaking about how we can best “save ourselves.” He was speaking of the opposite, how we can “lose ourselves” for others. This is our starting point for our hope of a better future, and this is where we begin in our discussions on this matter.

When we argue about Jesus’s statements in isolation, like when he told his disciples that he came not to bring peace, but a sword, or when he told his disciples to buy swords, we are often speaking out of context. We give these statements the context of our desire for self-protection, but Jesus was speaking of the opposite. If anything, he was denying us this self-protection, if we would be his disciples.

He was saying that this is the cost of our discipleship. His telling his disciples to buy swords was a figure of speech for the violence ahead. It wasn’t to be taken literally. He was telling them they must be ready to lay down their lives for him. He said this to them often. Peter still misunderstood Jesus, as he often did. Peter, just like us, learned slowly.

Most of the Jews were expecting the Messiah’s kingdom to come violently. So Jesus was explaining that it comes peacefully. If there is violence, then it is the violence of the world against his kingdom, it is not the violence of his people in retaliation. This was as unacceptable to people in Jesus’ day, as it is to people today. This is why so many of this displaces stopped following him. When they found out he wouldn’t be king, in their traditional sense of taking up arms against their enemies, they totally lost interest in being in his group.

John traces this in his Gospel. In chapter 2, many believed, but Jesus knew their hearts and knew what they wanted. In chapter 3, he told them the Messiah would be lifted up and killed, and his followers would inherit this pacifist kingdom. The message was too clear, and the crowds lost interest in him. Throughout the rest of the Gospel, John shows that violence was to have no part in this kingdom, and in fact this kingdom would instead suffer violence against it.

I guess we can discuss the text here, which says, "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force." This could be a reference to the violence against John, and the violence against Jesus. He would be scapegoated by the world, which didn't want to lose its advantaged rule over others. Or, it could be a reference to Micah 2:13, which Jesus was quoting, which refers to the shepherd in their culture, who broke down the walls of the sheepfold in the morning, to let his sheep out to pastures and water. That is, the breaking of Jesus' body, would allow the sheep to escape out of the law and into eternal life. This isn't violence committed by Jesus, but by satan against Jesus, which turns out to our deliverance.

Jesus' main message was that, unlike the kingdoms of this world, like those Isaiah and Daniel spoke of, the gentile powers, of which Israel was, unbeknown to itself, actually a part, since it adopted all the same methods, the kingdom of God would come completely without violence, or any form of human manipulation. The violence of all the other kingdoms was based on covetousness, self-preservation, but the kingdom of God would not have any self-interest. If people want it, fine; if not, then God will wait. The kingdom of God is not forced upon people, like human kingdoms always are.

The kingdoms of our world are either forced through military means, or through appeal to human desires, like satan used in the Garden, like advertising today, or a mixture of these. But there is always the profit motive in these kingdoms. Rome's kingdom was based upon both military brute force, and the appeal to some classes for a better life, in addition to sports and bloody entertainment (put movies and video games), to prevent us from any meaningful existence and from becoming occupied over questions about mercy for the masses. It is the same today. In one way or the other, we all participate in the violence of our world.

So, in contrast to these kingdoms, Jesus claimed that his kingdom is not of this world, and if it was, his servants would fight for it. This is a kingdom that comes through heavenly means, not earthly means. It comes through God's grace and mercy, in keeping his promises, not through our worldly powers. This meant that Jesus would not use violence in the defence, nor in the expansion, of this kingdom, and that he would also forbid his disciples from using the same. This was the context of Jesus' statements about violence. His kingdom must stand completely apart from the kingdoms of the world, because his kingdom has come to renew the world. We can't renew the world by being of the world.

If Jesus forbade us from using violence to extend his kingdom, what did he expect us to use instead? This is where the bulk of his teachings fit in. His kingdom offers us a different way of doing things. It starts with, "Do not resist evil." This means that we are not to resist evil violently. This is a plain command of Jesus for his disciples, for any who would take up membership in his kingdom. He replaces this with another way of resisting evil. He doesn't mean we shouldn't resist evil at all, but that there is a better way of doing it, one that really defeats it.

When we resist evil the world's way, we just make more evil. When we use violence against one form of evil, we cause unjust damage against many people and thereby sow the seeds for tomorrow's evil. This is the most constant theme we see with the modern history of America. We are repeatedly faced with the consequences of yesterday's wars and victories, and this is plainly obvious in recent times. This is common to our whole human history.

A violent solution against evil is commonly unbalanced and commonly has mixed motives. The group that comes as the "righteous judge," also has fault and self-interest. Before "righteous retribution" occurs, there is propaganda. This entails the advertisement of wrongs the others have done. These wrongs are held up, as though the whole other population are guilty of them; all members of that

group are said to commit them. The wrongs are also often misjudged, just to feed the bloodlust. It is also silently stated that the group who is to avenge these wrongs, does not commit the same wrongs themselves. All this is unbalanced and unjust.

This is why taking vengeance upon wrong, generally produce's more wrong and sows the seeds for future conflict. Propaganda has wrong motives. It is always the prelude to self-justified conflict, and therefore of future cultural clashes. A better alternative is the patient development of cultural understanding and mutual care.

Speaking of Western contributions, or the *log in our eye*, C. S. Lewis wrote, "If ever the book which I am not going to write is written, it must be the full confession by Christendom of Christendom's specific contribution to the sum of human cruelty and treachery. Large areas of "the World" will not hear us till we have publicly disowned much of our past. Why should they? We have shouted the name of Christ and enacted the service of Moloch." (C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*)

Jesus gives us another way of resisting evil. You resist the evil itself, not the evil person. You refuse to respond to evil, but resist it by responding against it, or oppositely to it. You resist evil by bottling it and taking it out of the system. You deplete the environment of evil, by answering it with good. This is strategic resistance that works. This action is actually the call of the church, but is the one call we often stand against more than any other. We actually stand against what our Lord gave us as our main call in our nations. We say our main call is making Christ known. Yes, but this is who Christ is, and this is how we make him known.

This is the thing with the word pacifism. People often claim it means to do nothing, to show no resistance, to be useless in the face of evil. This is a total misrepresentation, designed to mock the truth. Pacifism doesn't mean to show no resistance. It means to show plenty of resistance. It means to show far more resistance than is common. If we participate in our worldly narrative of war and consumption of resources, rather than in the mercy of God, then we are doing nothing about evil and violence. We are not resisting the spirit of our age at all. But if we work against evil, long before there are any wars, then we are highly active in resisting it. Resisting evil involves many life style choices, the kind of choices Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount and in his other teachings.

Forgiving enemies is resisting evil. Loving and serving enemies is resisting evil. These are highly effective means. They take evil out of our systems. It's like taking useless dirt out of a hole and replacing it with very wholesome dirt. When you plant a tree there, it will flourish. We are taking the bad out of the world and replacing it with good. But to do this, we have to forsake the advertising narrative, that it is our personal lives that matter. We have to forsake the religious narrative, that people of other religions are the enemy. We have to forsake the nationalist narrative, that people of other nations are worse sinners than we are. We have to forsake all the narratives that Jesus called the Jews to forsake, and take his narrative about treating people differently.

So Jesus is teaching us about learning the values of a new kingdom, going about life in a different way, not using the normal worldly logic, but one from heaven, imitating what God did in his incarnation and in laying down his life to reconcile the world. We are to follow this logic in renewing the world and in overcoming evil. When we fight evil with force, it escalates and spreads. We when we answer it with good, we take it out of the way, even if it is a cost to us to do so. We have thought that we get rid of evil by blowing it up, but Jesus said we get rid of it by soaking it up.

One thing we could be doing is investing in research into peacebuilding, instead of investing so much into weaponry. So few resources are put into peacemaking research. We still think that force is our best bet. For example, just building schools in one environment, or taking measures to bring down

corruption in another environment, would go a long way to enhancing living conditions and promoting peaceful communities, where people have opportunities others take for granted.

But we don't want to do this. Munitions companies lobby politicians for more access to world markets. There is too much money in it. We don't attack corruption, when the stolen money from those places sits in our own nation's bank accounts. We allow the suffering of millions of people, when we are allies with those who want it that way. We haven't given the teachings of Jesus any serious attention in our world. And then we say they don't work. We auto-accept the solution of making more weapons, that cost untold billions, billions that could lift so many people in war-torn nations into productive lives. When we put as much research into peace and building lives, as we do into war and tearing lives down, we may get somewhere.

We might ask, "What about the defence of our communities, the normal kind of policing that Paul spoke of, where such is are called the servants of God, to punish the evil doer?" (Romans 13:1-2) For some reason, Jesus didn't speak about this. In his whole ministry to the Jews, he didn't address it. He didn't address local or national defence responsibilities once.

When asked about taxes, he said, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." He said this because Caesar's image was on the coin. If Caesar wants his coin, give it to him. But God's image is in people. We give to God what is his, by loving our neighbour, not the coin. This is our transforming witness.

Why didn't Jesus speak of government protecting us, the way Paul mentioned it? Why didn't Jesus speak of government at all? Maybe because the kind of governments we have today weren't God's original intention. Maybe our governments are manmade. Maybe man made them to execute vengeance on evil doers. Maybe man made the laws of our governments to manage the evil that fallen man does. Maybe, when Paul said they are ministers of God, it means in the way Babylon was God's minister in punishing Jerusalem.

This is what Paul means by "all governments are ordained by God." He ordains when one overruns another, to bring down the level of evil against humanity. And he says, "Don't resist this government, for it's of me." This is what he said to Jerusalem, when Babylon came against them. Then, when that government becomes too corrupt, God opens the gate and allows another one to come in and overrun the last government. And on it goes.

That is, God uses fallen mans' systems to curtail the evil within the fallen world, even though these systems are also riddled with corruption themselves. That doesn't mean that any of this comes from God, but that he allows it, to keep the evil in the world in check. He allows this human form of government to stem mans' violence against man.

That doesn't mean that any of this was God's original intention, or that any of it points to God's kingdom. Jesus came to point us to God's kingdom. He came to point us to the kind of life, the kind of behaviour towards neighbour, that deals with evil in our daily lives. He came to call the church to be a witness to this very kind of heart and life. Like he said of the church, "You are the light of the world," meaning that through us, God is bringing new creation. He is speaking light into darkness and bringing renewal to all things.

So we can't depend on human government to do that, and that is why Jesus didn't speak of it. Human government isn't from heaven. It is of this world, and so it is not going to revive hearts and communities. Jesus didn't call the government of Rome, or any other government, to do this. He called his church to do it.

And this is also what Paul taught. He spoke of God revealing his wisdom to the governments of the world through the church. (Ephesians 3:9-11) He said that the church is to be the witness of the way of life that Jesus spoke of. Paul said the same in Corinthians. The church is to bring to nought the worldly powers of greed and violence that function in our societies, by allowing God's Spirit to do just that in our own lives and faith communities first.

So when the governments and other powers of the world, such as commercial powers, promote greed and national interest as our hope, the believing community promotes a witness of caring for others instead. When the world promotes power, position, corruption or racism, the believing community promotes service, even to those beyond our borders. The church is to be the light of the world, that transforms the powers.

Jesus never spoke of God fulfilling his purposes of earth renewal through these governments, but only through his kingdom, that is, his people formed in his image through the gospel. And the way his people are to do this, is through cross-bearing, not by making compromising alliances with government to force "God's agenda" on the world, or to save ourselves. This greatly misrepresents God's agenda, which isn't forced on others. It also corrupts the church, causing it to lose its saltiness, and to be thrown out; the world doesn't consider a cross-less church to be of any use, and this is the church's problem, when it forsakes the pacifism of its Lord for pragmatic reasons. It loses ground.

This kind of church joins the narrative of empire, against the interest of the weak, as we have done repeatedly, e.g. in the matter of the Australian Aboriginals, the American Indians, the South Africa of yesterday, and against women. It makes scapegoats of others. It becomes a voice for power, rather than a voice for the slaves of Egypt.

God didn't call us to power, which corrupts, but to service, which renews. This is Christ's way. Satan offered all the governments of the world to Jesus, to "expedite his kingdom mission in the world." Jesus refused. This tells us something about our governments. They are satanic, but also human and will be reconciled and renewed through the church's faithful witness and prayers.

The church's role is to live out the teachings of the cross in community relationships, doing to our neighbours, and to our enemies, what Jesus taught. This witness becomes the conscience of the world, exposing darkness and bringing transformation. This witness will often cost us. It will often go against the grain, because it will expose the advantage that others are enjoying. The powers won't like this contrast. The church will suffer as a result. This is also the cross that Jesus bore and spoke of.

So Paul didn't mention the military powers in relation to our own defence as the church, except they may serve us as normal citizens are served. He didn't mention them as something God used to serve and secure the church especially. The kingdom isn't advanced, or secured this way. Paul mentioned these powers, as something that exists in a fallen world, for a purpose that isn't anything to do with the commission that Jesus gave us. Paul mentioned them because he wants us to show respect to all levels of society, not to try to change society by disrespectful, or revolutionary, means. Paul didn't mention these powers because he wanted us to use them to carry out the church's role in the world.

Paul had just got through, in the previous chapter, showing how the kingdom is advanced and secured. There, Paul taught us about our role, about how we are to bring change, to be the salt and light that brings transformation. He spoke of not being conformed to these values of the world, but of being transformed by the changing of our mind. And then, he spoke of the areas in which our mind is to be renewed. These are forgiving, not taking vengeance, not repaying evil for evil, but

rather loving our enemies, and giving water to the enemy who is thirsty, and food to our enemy who is hungry. This is how we resist evil.

And this is the problem the Anabaptists had with the church after the Reformation. The church was still married to the state. They still used the state for their protection and to secure the gospel within nations. As one author put it, today's politics are often "a particularly clear presentation of a long-term temptation (as old as the third temptation of Christ). The emperor, or king, or president offers to further the mission of the church. The church, in turn, provides legitimacy to power."

The Reformation didn't deal with our most domestic demons; especially exceptionalism, meaning our right, even our calling, to bear military arms to "fix" the world, while we demonise others. This exceptionalism was Israel's demon that dealt with Jesus. The Anabaptist tried to address this after the Reformation, but their message was roundly rejected and Anabaptist were hunted down and killed. We haven't yet addressed this, to our present time.

To Paul, pacifism didn't mean just don't harm others. It isn't just to do with sins of commission. It is much more to do with sins of omission, omitting to serve our enemies. To Paul, pacifism meant to reach, love and serve those people who are our enemies, instead of calling on the government to kill them. This is the cross, what Jesus looks like, who God is. He didn't come to condemn us, or to prosecute us through government. That is what we do to ourselves, through our continued destructive lives. Pacifism isn't passive, it is highly active; it is putting the interests of others ahead of ourselves.

"But I say to you who hear (who want to listen), love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them."

This was behaviour totally opposite to the logic of the worldly government. Government speaks of justice in retribution. The church speaks of love for those who have offended us. These are totally opposite. The church doesn't take the government's role, thinking it is doing the will of God. We take the role that Paul spoke of in Romans 12. This way, Paul said, we heap burning coals of fire on the world's conscience, which is our witness of good. Paul said, "Overcome evil with good." This is our call and this is what Jesus taught.

Paul and Jesus taught the same thing. The church is not to take up the government to change the world, to execute vengeance on the sinners, but we are to take up our cross and serve the world, especially the sinners.

Was the Early Church Pacifist?

There is no doubt about the pacifism of the early church. The book of Revelation depicts it well. The church is the virgin bride, which follows the Lamb. This imagery distinguishes them from both the whore, or unfaithful wife of Jerusalem, and the beast, Rome, who both care for their own interest, and follow this with violence and abandonment of those in need. The bride cares for others, both within the church and their enemies outside the church.

The Revelation is about the church's refusal to take the mark of the beast, which is violent greed, forsaking the care of others. The beasts hate this witness against them and they pursue the church. The church continues in pacifism, not retaliating, "not loving their own life, even to death." This causes its witness to be highly effective, and it turns the world upside-down.

The Revelation has images of violence. It is like the Psalms, with lamentations. For example, the church pleading, "How long will you not avenge," meaning, "How long will you allow this persecution to go on?" This portrays the extreme difficulty of the persecuted. They are human, like everyone else, and they have human responses. But the Holy Spirit helps us, bringing us through to love for our enemies.

One of the main themes of the New Testament is the victory of the bride; they didn't become like the beast; their hearts didn't yield in the end to his hatred of others. They became "overcomers," just like Christ, who prayed in the intensity, "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they do." This was the prayer of many believers murdered for entainment in the Roman games.

Revelation adopts conquest language, just as saw Paul did. The purpose again is transformative, by contrasting our human violence with God's mercy. God wars against the spirit of the beast, not allowing it into his own nature in his battle to overcome it. He also defeats the beast within the hearts of his redeemed. Jesus is depicted on a white horse, with a sharp sword going out of his mouth, not in his hand. This is a symbol of his great victory over the beast, not with violence, but with his word, which strikes down wickedness in the hearts of his people, giving them victory over self-love, purifying them, as the vision shows. This is a victory of pacifism over violence, as we see in the actual history of the early church.

Jesus treads out the vine press of God's wrath. This, at first appearance, looks like God's wrath against his enemies, but this is another image that is transformed. The one treading is normally the one crushing the grapes. But this time he instead becomes the grapes that are crushed. That is, God achieves this great treading of his enemies, by becoming the enemy that satan treads upon.

The vision refers to Isaiah 63. God himself becomes the grapes that are trodden down in the press. His wrath is turned against our enemies, meaning it is actually mercy for humanity. The enemies he treads down are satan, sin and death, not the human racial enemies of Israel, as they assumed. His broken and pressed body becomes wine for the nations. The symbol of Christ in the winepress became a very powerful image of church artwork, depicting God's self-giving love, pouring himself out for his enemies.

Revelation is about the victory Christ won in battle, and transfers to his saints who follow him. As the beast came to destroy both Jesus on the cross, and later Jerusalem, there was a great victory for God, in the great harvest of people who triumphed over this beast and were redeemed. This was the war of God, fighting for the souls of his people, in whom satan could not obtain a hold, despite all of his rage.

Other accounts of the “wrath of God” in the Revelation describe God handing over the violent people to their own end. After giving them countless signs of mercy, in the end God stops the persecution against his people by allowing the wicked to kill themselves. Every fulfilling of the “wrath of God” in revelation is undertaken by the violence of man upon man. God commits none of it whatsoever. Power becomes “drunk in the blood of the victims,” and those involved in power destroy each other. God has decreed that the Lamb, the meek, shall inherit the earth. See earlier chapters on the wrath of God and the fire from heaven.

The controlling image of the Revelation is the Lamb of God. People have said that Jesus was the Lamb before he died, but in his ascension he became the Lion, who seeks war and destruction of his enemies, more particularly, our enemies. This isn't true. The lion image depicts God's conquering battle on the cross as the lamb, before the ascension. God is not the one seeking war. The imagery of Revelation depicts the wrath that the enemies bring upon themselves, as God continues in his cross-shaped love for them, continuing to suffer for them, in that his patience doesn't destroy them, even though they reject him.

In Rev 5, John hears a voice behind him saying the Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed. This is the only time this Lion is mentioned in the Revelation. As John turns to see this Lion, he sees a Lamb, as though it had been slain. The lion depicts the overcoming God. The lamb depicts how this God overcomes, by becoming the sacrifice of the world's wrath (scapegoated). This is the controlling theme of the whole of the Revelation. This Lamb is mentioned 29 times in the Revelation, and is the constant refrain throughout the whole vision. The Lamb gives his life; the beasts take life.

In addition to the Book of Revelation, pacifism is also the underlying theme in all of Paul's letters. All Paul's letters called believers to follow Christ's example. This is the same with Peter's letters. Repeatedly, Peter told the believers to emulate Christ's self-giving suffering, in being a witness to the truth, as the means of overcoming and transforming the world.

Paul's main call to pacifism was to be fulfilled through the believer's service orientated lives. Philippians, in particular, is all about this service. Philippians was written in the apocalyptic style of the Jewish people. Jesus was the Son of Man of Daniel 7, exalted to God's right hand. He did this through suffering service. The letter speaks of the coming resurrection, also in keeping with Daniel's vision.

To Paul, the central theme of the apocalypse, that which is unveiled by the cross, is the service orientation, the way God overcomes evil through self-giving. This permeates Paul's whole message, and the whole example he tried to live. The Philippians are called to forsake Roman privilege and to dedicate their lives to one another of all classes. The pacifism they were called to, was to emulate the loving God in their society, refusing the violence and self-gratification that their cultures demanded of them. There is no doubt about the pacifism central to this message.

This service is also the central theme of Thessalonians. Here, the persecution of their enemies was emphasised. Paul used this backdrop of violence to paint the picture of the pacifist church. They were to renounce the way of violence that was coming against them. They had been called out of that world, and now they were to live in love and faith, which should grow all the more, in contrast to the darkness. They were to grow in patience and endurance, in the midst of their suffering. They were to follow Paul, who was like a nursing mother to them, in his care for each person.

The Thessalonians were called out of violence, directly into a life of endurance, love, hope, faith and care. A nurse heals wounds. He doesn't make wounds. They are not to take vengeance, but to leave

judgement entirely in God's hands. The call to pacifism in Thessalonians is central to the letters. It was the actual life style Paul was painting.

Romans is the same. The letter starts by plainly unseating Caesar from the throne, and replacing him with Christ. Rome had claimed the position in Daniel 7, and by senate decree, they had sat Caesar at the right hand of power in heaven, to govern the nations on earth. This was widely known, and Paul directly refutes this, while writing to the church in that city. By doing this, Paul was denying the self-orientation of the Roman rule and culture. He was calling the Roman believers, to instead emulate Christ, who proved his Lordship, giving his life for others. This death and resurrection, this apocalyptic service, showed Christ worthy.

Paul's call to victory over the world in Rome was unity and service. They were called to love each other, from different racial, economic and social backgrounds, to fellowship and eat together at one table, forgiving each other's weaknesses and differences. This, coupled with the service call to love their enemies, was their victory path, not the path that Rome took against its enemies. They were to "overcome," meaning to find victory over the world, through doing good. Again, Romans is clearly pacifist, especially in contrast with the Roman way of rule in the city Paul was addressing.

Pacifism was also shown by the way Paul dealt with issues of government in general. In the opening chapter of Romans, he plainly dealt with the Roman government as pretenders, as a complete sham, as satanic in nature. But in chapter 13, Paul called the believers to obey the government and give them respect. This is a balance we must all find in our lives. On the one hand, Paul's outspokenness, in showing powers up, contrasting them to the true power of the life of Christ. On the other hand, Paul's refusal to act in rebellion against authority. This, again, was to follow Christ, who obeyed Pilate, who had him sentenced to death. Paul didn't just say this about government, but he called believers to respect and obey all social institutions, such as social order in marriage, or social order in slavery. Peter did the same in his letters.

This was important, especially in regard to marriage. With the liberty that women had in the gospel, being established, as the New Testament shows, in all levels in gospel ministry, as well as in all levels of church leadership, the believers had to be careful not to bring accusation against themselves, by being seen to revolt against social order in marriage. This would equate them, in the minds of their neighbours, with the sexual religious cults. They were to transform customs in marriage, bringing down patriarchal culture, by mutual service, not by disrespect for each other, or disrespect for their neighbour's conscience.

We see this in the way Paul told them to eat in each other's houses, not causing a stumbling block to those of weaker faith. All things were done, so as not to give offence, because of the gospel. The same could be said of the slavery institution. It was not of God, but they were to overcome evil the way Jesus did on the cross, not by rebelling against social authorities.

All of this further brings out the church's stance on pacifism, as shown by the example of the cross. They were to transform the world, not by any form of rebellion whatsoever, not in any way by the arm of the flesh, but by respect, by service, by love, seen by their sensitivity for the conscience of others in the society. This is remarkable love for their neighbour. It is pacifism to the extreme.

They were not in any way to conform to, or adopt the nature of the beast, in overcoming the beast. They could not overcome the evil of Rome by disrespecting the government of Rome. They could only overcome it by contrast, by love and genuine faith. Paul's call to respect government in Romans 13, isn't a call to put away pacifism, because Rome bears weapons to destroy the ungodly, but a call to pacifism, because we can't follow the violent ways of Rome in disrespect of others.

Paul is utterly consistent in his message; follow Jesus Christ, who defeated evil by serving. Don't try to defeat evil with any form of evil, whatsoever. Overcome it through pacifism. Overcome it by following Jesus. If you try any other way, you become just like the ones you are trying to overcome. You become part of them.

Looking at the early church in Acts we see exactly the same kind of church. They never had a call to arms among them, to defend themselves against their persecutors. You never see any of them carrying weapons, though in every place you see persecution against them. Sometimes this was severe, yet you never hear of any self-defence, nor of retaliation against others. All the first apostles of Jesus became martyrs for the faith. None of them sought deliverance through violent means. Sometimes they fled, but they never took up arms against others.

The community behaviour of the believers in Acts was central to how pacifism works. There were no denominations to alienate worshippers from each other. They were one family, from all backgrounds. This is how mercy justice spreads. They got to know the problems each person had, from their different parts of society, and they helped each other. This was worship. Professionals, government staff and peasants all ate together. Without these relationships, injustice between different groups grows like a fungus.

They sold their land and helped each other in need. This care for neighbour breaks up the fallow ground of injustice and sows healing for wounds. Zacchaeus launched into this behaviour as soon as he was saved. John the Baptist proclaimed it for all who repent. In Acts, the people, led by the Spirit, were doing the very things that build a new type of peaceful kingdom in the world, possibly without fully realising it at first, but just out of love. It was the very opposite life style to the one that was tearing Jerusalem apart in the first century. They reversed the very problems that James, in his letter, said were then leading to war.

This continued on after the first apostles. Countless numbers were killed by Rome, but they never preached retaliation, or violent resistance. They instead preached forgiveness of their enemies, and sought ways to help them. They took in their rejected children, and ministered to many pagans during plagues, at great risk to their own lives. This is the kind of thing they did over and over, risking their lives to serve their enemies, and this eventually turned the whole empire of Rome over to Christianity. They overcame one of the most violent empires of history, without the sword. If it was done then, it can be done today. Nothing has changed, except our perspective. When we defeated Rome, we became part of Rome, and that has changed our perspective.

It is well documented also, that the early church was doctrinally pacifist. They were against killing of any kind. They were against killing in war, killing in capital punishment, against euthanasia, and killing of babies, or abortions. This is where we can learn today. We speak against abortion, but press for capital punishment and relish in war, calling for actions which have killed hundreds of thousands of innocents, in recent times. The inconsistency here is glaring.

How can we be pro-life in one area and pro-death in other areas? It is not the character of the church, which follows Christ, to be pro the death of any person, except for giving ourselves in their place, as Jesus did; even for Barabbas, the insurgent. How can we ever act and speak outside of this clear character of the church? There is a better way to overcome abortion, and that is to serve the mothers and their babies, as the early church did.

The early church even forbade any believer to serve in the Roman army. This wasn't just because of their idolatry, but early writings also say it was because of their killing. If someone was in the army, they should look for non-killing roles. This is interesting in the light of Paul's statement in Romans

13, calling the Roman government “servants of God.” It shows how the early church understood what Paul said. They didn’t take it to mean that what the Roman army did in any way reflected God or his kingdom.

The reason for these views of the early church, was because of how they read the Prophets, like Isaiah, where they saw nations beating their swords into ploughshares. They believed this call was for today, for the church age. They saw the church as the instrument of God, bringing this peace change, transformation, to the whole world. They saw themselves as in the early days of embarking on this world renewal.

They abandoned the violent end-times teachings of the earlier Jewish communities, and embraced an “end-times” of the kingdom of God, transforming governments and armies through the self-giving witness of the church. They didn’t see Jesus coming in the next week, not until the completion of the church’s mission, in bringing these enemies of the world, greed and violence, and death, under the feet of their Master, Christ. This is how we serve our Master, by working with him, in the accomplishment this kind of victory over the world.

There is a sentiment, that withdrawing from armies, especially when those armies serve unjust ends, is still somehow cowardly. It is more often the opposite. It is hard to die, but to live in the face of those who mock you is sometimes more difficult. The early Christians were greatly mocked for their stance. The true life of pacifism may put you in more danger than some soldiers face. A true pacifist is often seeking to help people out, who live in very difficult and sometimes dangerous circumstances.

Look at the lives of Jesus, Paul and all the first disciples. Was their pacifism cowardly? True pacifism is anything but cowardly and it is anything but selfish withdrawal. It is a selfless way of life. And true pacifism isn’t letting other people do the dirty work in keeping peace. It can be very dirty and can contribute very significantly to peace.

Today, many of us have two issues with pacifism. These are self-preservation, and private ownership of our property. These are the unalienable rights of our modern democracies. But instead, we have found them to the path of death. That is what our modern civilizations are beginning to discover. Jesus said, he who loses his life, finds it, and he who finds his life, loses it. This is what all the letters of the New Testament teach and it is what the whole early church held to.

Conclusion

We see that the history of the scripture is the history of vengeance in the heart of man. It is a history of a loving God, giving man his freedom, and then still loving and engaging with man to defeat this vengeance of anger, which has been destroying our societies.

After the Flood, God began to work through *charam*, to limit our violence. But this was just the beginning of his engaging our communities and moving us towards peace. His transformation of our societies began slowly, with the law, which witnessed to demilitarization, and the implementation of care and love for all, including our foreign neighbours and enemies.

All the while, God was moving to replace sacrifice as mans' atoning instrument, with loving service of others instead. But to achieve this, God had to put on flesh and come into our violent systems of religion. In doing so, he shows that it is we who reject God, not God who rejects us. His death exposed our scapegoating cultures and opened his path back to life; receiving his free forgiveness and sharing that with the world.

By becoming *charam*, God defeated vengeance in our hearts. With a new community of love, he sets about renewing the nations. God is still moving the world towards the place of maturity, where we freely choose to abandon the accusations of satan against others, and instead, to take up our cross and move towards the healing of our enemies.