

A God Not to Be Trifled With

By Joe McKeever

Recently, while the residents of Charlotte, N.C., were trying to decide whether to name a new park after their most famous son, Billy Graham, the city's newspaper ran some of the mail they have received on the subject. Most writers felt this is a fitting tribute to the world-famous evangelist; some didn't want to go that far; but the final letter pulled me up short.

"Graham and his God don't deserve honor," wrote Paul Jamison. "He promotes a God who gets heinously violent (plagues, floods, a bloody sacrifice of his Son, threatens to destroy the earth) and finally a torturous eternal punishment for nonbelievers. So I say no to naming a peaceful city park after a believer of (sic) this raging God."

It probably does us church folk good to hear such from outsiders occasionally. It's like a glass of ice water in the face.

We can agree with much of Jamison's letter. God did indeed send those plagues on Egypt, the flood in Noah's day and His Son to a cross. The simple fact is that Paul Jamison doesn't know the half of it. How about the time an angel of the Lord killed 185,000 Assyrians in one night (2 Kings 19:35)? Or when God put Jonah through immense suffering? Or the time He killed a well-meaning fellow who was steadying the Ark, as it was about to slip off a cart (2 Sam. 6)? Even David grew angry with God over that. And don't overlook the fact that Jesus had more to say about Hell than He did about Heaven.

I'm always fascinated when I hear people accusing Bible-believers of concocting these stories.

These are not made-for-our-comfort bedtime lullabies. They are in-your-face true accounts of the dealings of Almighty God with humankind. No one would voluntarily create such a difficult image of God. The gods that earthlings manufacture tends to be the kind we can manipulate for our purposes. But this God will not be manipulated. One who knows Him well put it like this: "*Our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased*" (Ps. 115:3).

In a two-verse span, the apostle Paul celebrates "*the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth*" and announces that "*the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...*" (Rom. 1:16,18). This God of love is a God of wrath. This is not two sides of His nature: it is His nature, period.

One of the most profound things I know is that when God is expressing His wrath, we see His love. Every "cruel" act of God that the Paul Jamisons and we find in the Bible is evidence of the love of God. Sometimes we see it; sometimes we don't. God sent those plagues on a wicked nation to get them to end the slavery of two million Jews. Which do we want, the plagues or the slavery?

Or, take the death of God's Son on the cross. The most beloved verse in the entire New Testament, John 3:16, presents both the love and wrath of God as a single unity. "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son*" - there it is: God's love causing Him to

give His Son to die on the cross - "*that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish*" - that is, die an everlasting death in Hell - "*but have everlasting life.*"

So, why do we in the church emphasize almost totally the love of God, His mercy and grace, with hardly a mention of His wrath toward ungodliness? Because the Lord Jesus Christ has delivered us "*from the wrath to come*" (1 Thess. 1:10). We celebrate the eternal life that is in Christ. But we remember that millions still live in rebellion and ignorance of God. "*Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord,*" Paul wrote (2 Cor. 5:11).

Canadian pastor Mark Buchanan, in *Your God Is Too Safe* (Multnomah Publishing), writes: "...The idol of the nice god, the safe god, has done more damage to biblical faith-more damage to people coming to faith-than the caricature of the tyrant god ever did. God's wrath and sovereignty we easily caricature into tyranny. And God's kindness and tender mercies we just as easily transmute into mere niceness."

Our God is not anyone's caricature. He is neither a tyrant nor a sweetie pie. He is "*Our Father, who art in Heaven.*" He is the only God there is. He demands justice, punishes ungodliness, and is not One to be trifled with. He is holy and we are not. To enter His presence except on His terms is playing with fire. Only as a result of repentance and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ may we "*come boldly unto the throne of Grace*" (Heb. 4:16).

Someone ought to tell Paul Jamison the whole story of our God. God wants you and me to tell the whole world the story of His love.

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