

**YOU ASKED FOR IT – PART 1: GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT
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SCRIPTURE TEXT: PSALM 145**

It is always interesting and revealing to ask people how they picture God in their mind's eye. One of the most common images is that of an old man with a beard and long robe described as either a grandfather figure or as a stern judge. Undoubtedly many of these perceptions are based on our childhood experiences at home and in religious instruction. Kids themselves give us interesting insights. The third and fourth graders in one Christian grammar school were asked to complete the following sentence: "By faith, I know that God is _ _ _ . Here are some of their responses:

- Amanda – "forgiving, because he forgave in the Bible, and forgave me when I went in the road on my bike without one of my parents."
- Brandon – "providingful, because he dropped manna for Moses and people, and he gave my dad a job."
- Paul – "caring, because he made a blind man see, and made me catch a very hot line drive that could have hurt me. He probably sent an angel down."
- Jeremy – "merciful, because my brother has been nice to me for a year."
- Ginny – "faithful, because the school bill came, and my mom didn't know how we were going to pay it. Two minutes later, my dad called, and he just got a bonus check. My mom was in tears."
- Hannah – "sweet, because he gave me a dog. God tells me not to do things that are bad. I need someone like that."

When this "you asked for it" topic was proposed, the inquirer raised the issue of the apparent different divine personages described in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament. The traditions of the Israelites and their ancestors would appear to reveal a God of laws and judgments on the people and nation, a warrior king who destroyed other peoples and nations, a powerful force who often acted unpredictably or contentiously. In contrast the New Testament seems to reveal a God of compassion and forgiveness who is not willing that any should perish. This God reveals his nature in Jesus and in the church that followed after him. Are these different depictions? How do you reconcile these perceptions?

It is my proposal that today in Part I we examine God as set forth in the Hebrew Scriptures and, then in Part 2 on Sunday, September 2, we look at the

revelation of God in the New Testament to determine the nature of the Lord we claim to worship and serve.

I invite you to listen now to the Psalmist who characterizes God in Psalm 145. (Read) There are several descriptors given which resonate with the story of the children of Israel's experience with their God as described in the Hebrew canon. When we as Christians talk about the Old Testament, it is important for us to realize that major portions were not written until after the time Israel became a nation. From their tribal roots, their history and experience with God came down through oral tradition and story telling. Thus the creation stories and patriarchal traditions serve to reinforce the central theme of this testament or "Covenant" we Christians call the Old Testament. This is more than a mere collection of books under one cover – all bear witness to the unique historical experiences of a particular people, of Israel from its beginning shortly after 2000 BCE down through the Maccabean Revolution, a century and a half before the Christian or common era.

Bernhard Anderson, the Old Testament scholar states, "It is the life story of Israel and their experience with the God who brought a large band of slaves out of Egypt, formed them into a people and a nation, and gave them a future. The Exodus, therefore is the central moment in Israel's history – here was Israel's true beginning, the time of its creation as a people, the purposive movement of events that made it possible later to see all history and nature embraced within the divine design. So deeply was the Exodus etched upon Israel's memory that the maturing faith of the people was essentially a reliving and reinterpretation of this historic event."

The nature of God revealed in the history of Israel, through the patriarchal traditions, in the prophetic writings and in the poetry and philosophy of the Hebrews has some constant characteristics. Our text in Psalm 145 captures very important ones that are supported by Israel's experience.

The first characteristic the psalmist points out is the indescribable greatness of God. (v.3) Over and over again in their life experiences and traditions the Hebrew people witnessed to the mighty acts and encounters they experienced with this God who was a living reality to them. They perceived this God as not only their king but creator and ruler of all humanity who acts with purpose in the history of civilization. As opposed to other conceptions of gods, the God of the Israelites is an immanent God who is interested and concerned for people and the events which go on in the creation. The exodus event and their history which followed highlight this concept reinforced by the oral tradition of the patriarchs' experiences. Out of Hebrew life history and scriptures, God abides with his people and desires on-going relationship with them. They affirm that relationship is a reciprocal action – just as God chooses to relate, so humankind can choose to relate

or not to do so. The Old Testament is full of accounts and stories of the struggles of men and women with this issue.

Another characteristic of the Hebrew God revealed in covenant with Moses and with previous patriarchs like Noah and Abraham is faithfulness. (v.13) Even when Israel denied or strayed as God's covenant people, they perceived divine direction and action, sometimes pleasant and often difficult, as keeping the promise and, sooner or later, restoring their focus and vision.

The psalmist also describes this divine "I am" as abounding in steadfast love. (v.8) God is defined as "gracious and merciful," "slow to anger," "good to all," and "compassionate" over all the creation. (v.8,9) This stands in stark contrast to the capriciousness and self-serving qualities of mythological gods and goddesses. This God is responsive to those who call out in faith. (v.18) This God provides and cares about people. In verse 17 we are reminded of the prophet Micah's words (Micah 6:8) "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." God shows the people the way in the constancy of love and mercy; even when the people were unfaithful and were disciplined and exiled under various world empires. This God remained faithful and loving and upon their repentance, enabled them to return to the land and Holy City. Further, the covenants (promises) God made with Noah and Abraham indicate God's love for all created humanity. Cynthia Campbell of McCormick Theological Seminary, in her book, *A Multitude of Blessings*, writes, "God reveals Godself as the one who makes and keeps promises, who claims people to be God's own, who expects loyalty and obedience from those people, and who promises loyalty to them forever. The relationship between God and humanity portrayed throughout the Bible is not a relationship of equality but one of reciprocity. God and humankind are not equal partners; but God does bind Godself and makes promises that cannot be broken."

Another characteristic of God is the descriptor of liberator and transformer. (v.19,20) Again the Exodus event is central. In Exodus 6, Moses perceives God saying, "I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the people, "I am the Lord and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them - - - I will take you as my people, and I will be your God." As God's people they came to represent God's way for the world as a witness to the nations. The pages of the Old Testament declare the consistent transforming message that this world revolves around God, not us.

Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read*, states, "The Hebrews had incessant reminders built into their culture. They dedicated their first born livestock and children to God, wore portions of the law on their heads and wrists, posted visible reminders on the doorways, said the word "blessed" a hundred times a day, even

wore distinctive hairstyles and sewed tassels on their garments. A devout Jew could barely make it through an hour, much less an entire day, without some reminder that he or she lived in God's world. Even the Hebrew calendar marked time by events such as Passover and Day of Atonement, not merely by the harvest cycle and the moon. The world, they believed is God's property. And human life is "sacred," which simply means that it belongs to God to do with what he wills." Such an outlook sure differs from our culture steeped in the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness where we rebel against any interference with our personal rights or personal space. In our secularized and material environment, we can go endlessly without any reminder that this is God's world. Yet when people respond to this God's love in faith, their lives are significantly transformed in their priorities and are liberated from slavery to the dominant culture.

A final characteristic of the nature of God given in this psalm and supported by the history and writings of the Hebrew Covenant is the kingship of God for the faithful and creation. (v.1,11-13,20) The promise to the Israelites was a land of their own. Their attempts to set up a theocracy were unsuccessful due to human self-centeredness and corruption which were the antithesis of God's kingdom way. But throughout their journey as a people and a faith, the promise was reiterated that God's kingdom is a reality based in a people of faith ultimately transforming humanity and the creation. This was the call to Israel and remains their and our call today. The prophets declared the message of the kingdom of God in their advocacy for the poor, the forgotten, the rejected, and the outcasts. They described the priority of inward intention and commitment over outward trappings and religiosity. They spoke of coming judgment on injustice and hypocrisy – that evil would be exposed and named and those judged would suffer consequences for their evil in their life history. They declared that a new world order was possible and coming. They spoke of new heavens, a new earth, and a new heart. In this kingdom justice, integrity and peace will overcome. We noted earlier that God is faithful and keeps divine promises. The Hebrew view of God supports this kingdom way.

We have just touched on some of the important characteristics of the nature of God as described in the Hebrew Covenant, which we Christians call the Old Testament. What does it mean for our lives today? We deal with the same issues the Israelites encountered. The circumstances differ as do the historical events. But we as part of humanity struggle with similar choices. Are we the center of our universe or is God? How do we lead our lives – captains of our own soul or as those related to God who values and accepts us? Do we go through the motions of religion or are we committed to be faithful to and witness for the kingdom way?

Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, succinctly relates, "The rest of the Bible is to a large extent the story (and stories) of this state of

affairs: the human predicament and its solution. Our lives east of Eden are marked by exile, and we need return and reconnection; by bondage, and we need liberation; by blindness and deafness, and we need to see and hear again; by fragmentation, and we need wholeness; by violence and conflict, and we need to learn justice and peace; by self-centeredness and other centeredness, and we need to center in God.” Such are the central claims of Israel’s stories of human beginnings and their history as a nation representing God to the world.

The most pressing question which will be pursued further in Part 2 on September 2, is how do we understand our relationship to God and the kingdom way in our lives and calling to be God’s people?

Amen

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