How Are We Saved? The Character of God and the Atonement in the Adventist Church

Are we accusing God of human sacrifice when we say that Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins?
sins? Does God punish people, or does He simply allow them to suffer the natural consequences of their choices?

Timothy Arena tackles these tough questions and more. He argues that some Adventists, in attempting to vindicate God’s character, have promoted faulty views of salvation. Read his analysis and join the discussion!

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Jonah Meets ISIS
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How Are We Saved? The Character of God and the Atonement in the Adventist Church (Part 1)

Timothy Arena

What is sin? Why did Jesus die on the cross? How are we saved? Is God’s character both loving and just, wrathful and gracious?

These are profound questions—ones that require humble, thoughtful study and biblical reflection. Two recent books by Seventh-day Adventist authors have sought to answer these questions in ways that occasion careful analysis.

Sin, Punishment, and Forgiveness

Timothy Jennings, M.D., in a recent book called The God-Shaped Brain, suggests that sin consists of fear and selfishness, but that this “isn’t our fault” since we were born with a “terminal illness.”[1] Rejecting the idea that Jesus took our place and was punished for our sins, he also discards the idea of a punishment from God altogether.[2] He suggests that the purpose of the cross was to “reestablish trust,”[3] not to pay the penalty for His broken Law.

For Jennings, sin always brings its own punishment. God does not keep any records of sin in heaven for which we need Christ’s intercession, atonement, and forgiveness. Rather, God is like your doctor, who prescribes a remedy and treatment for your illness. The idea of Christ taking our place is ridiculed as the equivalent of the doctor examining a healthy patient in place of the sick one. In this view, salvation consists of healing our minds and recognizing that God does not punish or need the death of Christ in order to forgive us.[4] The ultimate result in Jennings’ view is that God’s healing brings us to a place where we will have “no defects” and “no longer need the written law.”[5]

Another recent book from multiple Adventist authors (including Jennings), Servant God: The Cosmic Conflict over God’s Trustworthiness, propounds the same message. Herb Montgomery suggests that the results of sin are automatic—sin itself punishes, not God. He forgives everyone unconditionally; thus the only difference between the saved and the lost is “not that one group is forgiven and the other isn’t” but rather that some “believe how thoroughly and deeply they have [already] been forgiven.”[6] God accepts us “as we are, in all of our sinfulness,” without substitution or atonement.[7]

Another of the authors, Sue Lewis, suggests that the idea of the substitutionary death of Christ is the equivalent of human sacrifice, and that God forgives without the need for a sacrificial substitute.[8] “Christ did not need to be executed to make God willing to forgive and heal our hearts.”[9] God’s wrath is viewed as being only a giving over of sinful people to their rebellion, not in any way something related to punishment, revulsion, or retribution.[10]

Where Do These Ideas Come From?

Some of these ideas are by no means new in our history. According to Dr. Woodrow Whidden’s seminal biography of E.J. Waggoner, one of them—the denial of Christ’s substitutionary atonement—goes all the way back to this key figure.[11] Though he was greatly used by God in 1888 to draw attention to Christ’s salvation, Waggoner’s views began to change when he went to England in 1892. There he came under the influence of Edward Irving,[12] who taught against the substitutionary death of Christ.

In an article called “Why did Christ Die?”[13] Waggoner wrote (like these recent authors above) that “a sacrifice was not demanded.” He caricatured the idea of substitution in this way: “God was so angry at man for having sinned, that He could not be mollified without seeing blood flow; but it made no difference to Him whose blood it was, if only...
somebody was killed: and that since Christ's life was worth more than the lives of all men, He accepted Him as a substitute for them." Instead, wrote Waggoner, Christ died "to break down man's enmity."

This denial of the need for Christ's substitutionary atonement has probably been most popularized in Adventism by Graham Maxwell (who has made many otherwise positive contributions to Adventism). In his books, Can God Be Trusted and Servants or Friends, Maxwell propounded essentially all of the ideas that Jennings and the other authors of Servant God are embracing.[14] For Maxwell, sin is "not a legal problem," and there is no need for a substitute or the shedding of blood to allow for forgiveness.[15] Those who accept his view are God's friends, but those who accept a substitutionary view are mere servants.

**Positives and Negatives**

What are we to make of these ideas? Certainly, not all of them are wrong. It is true, as several of the above authors observe, that we are all born with the "illness" of sin in us (Ps. 51:5; Prov. 22:15; Eph. 2:3; Gen. 8:21) and that sin does bring natural consequences (Gal. 6:7; Hos. 8:7). It is also correct that God desires us to know Him—His character of love—and that He longs to change our sometimes distorted thinking about Him (Jer. 24:7; 1 John 4:8; Ezek. 18).

But the ideas that the results of sin are only intrinsic or natural; that Jesus was not our Substitute on the cross, paying the penalty for our sins; that vengeance and retribution have no place in God's character; and thus that the final destruction of the lost is self-generated seem to quite clearly stand at odds with many biblical passages.

**What Is Sin?**

The idea that sin brings its own punishment, while partially true, is not a sufficiently conceived description of its horrendous nature. According to Jennings' views, we are not essentially accountable to God for our sin. As we saw above, he believes that because we were born into a sinful condition, we are no more accountable for our sin than is a patient with a disease. But does this follow?

First of all, this view does not take sufficiently into account the role of Adam as our representative. Because of the Fall, we all enter the world in a lost, condemned state (Rom. 5:12-21). "Through one trespass there is condemnation for everyone" (Rom. 5:18, HCSB). As Ellen White put it, "The inheritance of children is that of sin. Sin has separated them from God. Jesus gave His life that He might unite the broken links to God. As related to the first Adam, men receive from him nothing but guilt and the sentence of death" (CG 475, emphasis supplied). Condemnation and guilt come upon all because Adam, as the first representative of the human race, bequeathed "guilt and the sentence of death" to all his progeny.[16]

We are not born as a "clean slate." Our initial condition brings God's revulsion and wrath (Eph. 2:3). Contrary to what many suppose, volition is not a condition of guilt; we are guilty for unintentional sins, and these require atonement (see Lev. 4-6; Heb. 9:7).[17] We are all born with sinful natures that are out of harmony with God, and God cannot accept us in this state, though we did not choose it. From the moment of our first breath, every human being stands condemned and guilty before God because of what we are in Adam.

This may seem unfair at first, but it is not the whole story. Because "the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men" (Titus 2:11, NKJV) ever since Adam fell—on the basis of Christ's promised and later actualized atonement—all have an opportunity to accept Christ and escape this condemnation, because He does not want any to perish (2 Pet. 3:9). He is the Second Adam who becomes our representative if we accept Him by faith (Rom 5:12-21). God desires our response of love for what He has done. We are justified by faith when we accept the gift of Christ's righteousness (Rom. 5:17).[18] Until that time, we are under the wrath of God (John 3:18-19, 36; Eph. 2:3) and will remain so until we accept Christ.[19]

But as these authors would rightly acknowledge, no one can be lost on the basis of inheritance alone. Anyone who is
lost is lost because they do not accept the remedy for sin. Our inheritance is not our only problem. All human beings have embraced and willingly acquiesced to this inheritance by choosing to disobey God. In both of these ways, “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23),[20] and “whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God” (Rom 3:19). “There is no one who does not sin” (2 Chron. 6:36). All who break God’s law are under its curse (Gal. 3:10, 22) and “deserve to die” (Rom 1:32). We are indeed accountable to God for who we are and what we have done.

So then what is the remedy for our condition? According to Jennings and the other authors of Servant God, the remedy is not forgiveness on the basis of the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross, but rather a change of thinking in the human being—an enlightened understanding. Certainly God wishes for us to be healed in our minds. But why does it have to be one and not the other? Why could it not be the case that God’s forgiveness offered through the substitutionary death of Christ is part of the very means He has for healing our condition?

This, in fact, appears to be exactly what Paul suggests in Romans. After describing the reality that “there is none righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:10, NASB) and that the Law of God condemns every human being (3:19), he explains the solution:

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:23-26).

Sin is in fact a legal problem. We need forgiveness for breaking God’s Law. We are condemned by the Law of God and deserve death, but God’s justice was displayed by Christ becoming the propitiation for our sins. This word propitiation (ἱλαστήριον) is connected to the sanctuary service and the “mercy seat” where blood was applied on the Day of Atonement to the Ark of the Covenant to atone for the sins of the people (Ex. 25:17-22; Lev. 16:2; 13-15). Paul (above) and John apply this to what Christ has done for us in His death (1 John 2:2; 4:10). This well-known passage from Isaiah seems to clearly indicate that Christ’s death is substitutionary.

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. . . . Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors (Isa. 53:3-6, 10-12).

As Paul points out, it is the very justification we receive by accepting Christ’s death that causes us to “have peace with God” (Rom. 5:1) and to be reconciled to Him. “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that
we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life" (Rom. 5:8-10).

Notice that God does indeed have wrath, but we need not fear it if we have Christ. It is only those who reject God’s means of salvation through Christ that must face His vengeance and wrath (Rom. 2:5; 2 Thess. 1:8; Heb. 10:30).

**Is God Exactly Like Your Family Doctor?**

Yes, God is our Great Physician who wishes to heal us. But no, God is not a fellow human being to whom we go for physical improvement. No, the Father laying our sins on Jesus is not the same as human sacrifice. The Trinity was in agreement concerning the plan of salvation. The Triune God poured out Their love to us by sacrifice in the Person of Christ, and all three Persons suffered at the cross. Jesus was not an unwilling victim. He laid His life down for us (Mark 10:45; John 10:15-18). No, a doctor placing a healthy patient’s records in place of a sick one is not at all the same as Christ’s imputed righteousness accepted in our behalf (2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 5:18-19; SC 62; 1 SM 396) and what is taught in our sanctuary doctrine: that the books of heaven contain records of our sins, and that these are erased on the basis of Christ’s atoning death (Dan. 7:10; Rev. 20:11-15; 21:27; 5T 471; GC 483).

God is the Creator of the universe, and as such He cannot allow the breaking of His Law without the punishment of death. This fact is revealed by the results of the final judgment—those who refuse Christ’s salvation are destroyed by a direct act of God (Rev. 20:9; 11-15; Rom. 2:5-9; 12:19; Heb. 10:26-31; 2 Thess. 1:8-10). And while it is true that all of us die because we are sinners, there are times when God actively executes people. Throughout Scripture God both allows sin to have its natural results as well as sometimes actively punishing and killing recalcitrant sinners (e.g., the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, Israel, Israel’s enemies, Nadab and Abihu, Ananias and Sapphira, King Herod, etc.). These people did not naturally self-destruct. And the final judgment of God is such that the lost are “thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:15)—it does not say that they willingly jump into it. Sin and rebellion against the Creator are treasonous offenses, and there is no such thing as unconditional forgiveness.

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*Satan deceives many with the plausible theory that God’s love for His people is so great that He will excuse sin in them; he represents that while the threatenings of God’s word are to serve a certain purpose in His moral government, they are never to be literally fulfilled. But in all His dealings with His creatures God has maintained the principles of righteousness by revealing sin in its true character—by demonstrating that its sure result is misery and death. The unconditional pardon of sin never has been, and never will be. Such pardon would show the abandonment of the principles of righteousness, which are the very foundation of the government of God. It would fill the unfallen universe with consternation. God has faithfully pointed out the results of sin, and if these warnings were not true, how could we be sure that His promises would be fulfilled? That so-called benevolence which would set aside justice is not benevolence but weakness. God is the life-giver. From the beginning all His laws were ordained to life. But sin broke in upon the order that God had established, and discord followed. So long as sin exists, suffering and death are inevitable. It is only because the Redeemer has borne the curse of sin in our behalf that man can hope to escape, in his own person, its dire results. (PP 522, emphasis supplied.)*

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“Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22). "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life" (Lev. 17:11). It is Jesus who came that “by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (Heb. 2:9). “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1Pet. 2:24). "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Pet. 3:18). God is loving and just, wrathful and merciful. God was not made loving by the propitiation, but He provided it because He is loving.
But this great sacrifice was not made in order to create in the Father’s heart a love for man, not to make Him willing to save. No, no! “God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son.” John 3:16. The Father loves us, not because of the great propitiation, but He provided the propitiation because He loves us. . . . God suffered with His Son. In the agony of Gethsemane, the death of Calvary, the heart of Infinite Love paid the price of our redemption. (SC 13.)

Coming next week in Part 2: How did this happen? And why does it matter?

Notes:


[2]Ibid., 72. “Whatever the reason for God’s [past] action[s], it could not be as I had been taught since childhood—that God inflicted punishment for sin. If punishment were the reason, then he would still be doling it out, since wickedness has in no way diminished. I realized, even using the logic of those who believe God does inflict punishment for sin, that he would never inflict it before judgment. And since the judgment hasn’t yet happened, then his actions in the past were not for the purpose of punishing.”

[3]Ibid., 165.

[4]Ibid., 130-133.

[5]Ibid., 175.


[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid., 306.

[9]Ibid., 309.


[16]Please note that I am not advocating the particular view of “original sin” that includes the idea that all human beings sinned “in Adam”—that we all sinned when he did. Rather I am suggesting that Paul’s point in Romans 5 is that because of Adam’s sin as our representative, all of us are born in a sinful state which is condemned by God—we
thus need a Savior from the start. Jesus, the second Adam, reverses the sinful condition for those who “receive the gift of righteousness” (vs. 17). Some have suggested that passages such as Ezek. 18 are arguments against the view presented here. But this is dealing with a different issue: The Israelites were complaining that they were doomed because of what their parents had done, but God was telling them that they could become different people than their parents. It is a chapter about individual responsibility and consequences; it is not dealing with the question of Adam’s role in our sinful state and condemnation, as is Romans 5. My view is similar to that of Biblical Research Institute writer Gerhard Pfandl, who writes, “It may be useful to distinguish between Adam’s guilt and our guilt as a consequence of our inherited sinfulness. We do not inherit Adam’s [personal] guilt, but as a consequence of Adam’s fall we are born distant from God, out of harmony with his will, in a state of sin which is condemnable and therefore we are guilty before God. E.G. White may be referring to this guilt” (Gerhard Pfandl, http://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/documents/sinoriginal-web.pdf, 20). I recognize that not all SDA teachers and theologians view these passages of Scripture and Ellen White in exactly these ways, and I am open to further insights after further study.

James 4:17 is a verse often used to mean that there is no such thing as unintentional sin. But it refers rather to what are called “sins of omission.” When someone knows the good that needs to be done and does not do it, they are sinning. The Bible is clear that unintentional sins are still sins (see passages cited above).

Some SDAs believe in what is called “universal legal justification.” This is the idea that everyone is born justified by the cross. They then need to experience a second stage of justification during their lifetimes. This view seems at odds with Paul’s repeated point that we are “justified by faith” in Christ and willingly receiving His gift of salvation (Rom. 3:24, 25, 28; 4:3-5, 23-25; 5:1; 9:30; Gal. 3:24; Eph. 2:8-10; etc.). Justification is offered to all, but only those who “receive the overflow of grace and the gift of righteousness” (Rom. 5:17, HCSB, emphasis supplied) are actually justified.

For those who die before reaching the age at which they can make a decision, we trust the mercies of God through Christ’s atonement (see 2SM 260; 3SM 313-315).

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture passages come from the English Standard Version, ESV.
Valmy Karemera

On Sunday, Dec. 14, the CBS channel will air an interfaith program that will feature the Sikhs, Mennonites, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The producers traveled to Silver Spring, MD, to interview some church leaders about the Adventist church. On the program, producers interview:

*Ella Smith Simmons*, Vice President of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, a Protestant denomination that began in America in the mid-1800s, and ask her about what it means to live as an Adventist today. We also hear from *Dr. Bill Knott*, editor of the Adventist Review and Adventist World, about how the religion was first founded. Also interviewed is *Richard Duerksen*, Assistant to the President for Maranatha Volunteers International. He shares his reflections on the faith and the mission work his organization is doing all over the world.

For your local CBS station listing, check here.

*Photo: Maranatha Volunteers International*
Omar Miranda

"Please bless great-grandmama, mama, and daddy. Help us to have a good night’s sleep—oh, yeah, God, please bless and protect all those people in Syria and Iraq that are being killed and terrorized, and please bless and be with those ISIS people. You know that they are so angry because they don’t know and love You. AMEN!"

I kissed my 8-year-old son, put him to bed, and—in shock—walked back to my bedroom. As I sat down, my head was spinning. Did my son just ask God to bless and be with terrorists?! Why would God bless anybody who forces people to "convert or die"?!

Everybody else in the house was asleep or otherwise occupied, and I was alone, struggling with my thoughts. I kept asking God, Why would my boy ask You to bless…THEM?

Since this summer I and the world have watched with horror as the ISIS terrorist organization has attacked, persecuted, killed, and driven out thousands of people. I had asked that God would stop them, but I was taken aback by my son’s love for…even them.

Just a few hours before, as my family and I had sat around our table and talked about our day, I had given my children a brief, age-appropriate version of the day’s world events. When we got to the situation in Iraq, my son asked a simple question: “Daddy, why are they [ISIS] doing this?”

My 12-year-old daughter—who’s convinced she knows everything already—shot back, “Hurt people hurt people. They’re doing that because they are angry and hurt because they don’t know Jesus.”

My son said, “OK,” and finished eating his food. Relieved, I thought the episode was over. Little did I know that still waters run deep. Fast-forward to my son’s bedtime, and—well, you know how that turned out.

But his prayer kept eating at me. I couldn’t shake it. Did God really expect my son, me, and my family to be praying that God would bless and be with ISIS? This question drove me to deep and prolonged prayer and Bible study. I needed to know what God said about terrorists—people who purposely and ruthlessly harm and persecute others simply due to a difference in values, religion, or beliefs. If God did say something about them, how did it relate to my life?

As I prayed, read, studied, and struggled with the cognitive dissonance I felt by being someone who passionately loves God and others but hates sin—in all its forms—I came to this conclusion: God addresses terrorism and persecution in surprisingly clear and plain language. God gives us a principle in an Old Testament story (actually an entire book) and then teases out that principle in several New Testament passages.

For the balance of our time, I’d like to:

- use the Old Testament story of Jonah as an object lesson of what we should do in the face of cruelty, barbarism, and sheer evil, as epitomized by the ancient inhabitants of Nineveh and modern ISIS.
- flesh out what Jesus and the apostles said our response should be, not just to terrorism and terrorists, but to people who “terrorize” and persecute us in our daily lives.

More Than a Fish Story

The Old Testament story of Jonah bears a striking resemblance to what’s happening today with ISIS. You should read it; it’s only four short chapters. Jonah, a prophet of God, was told to deliver a message to the inhabitants of Nineveh,
the flourishing capital and most populous city of the powerful and incredibly ruthless and evil Assyrian empire (2 Kings 19:36). Assyria, a kingdom of northern Mesopotamia, became the center of one of the great empires of the ancient Middle East. It was located in what is now northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey. Nineveh was situated on the east bank of the Tigris River opposite modern-day Mosul, Iraq—the very area now being terrorized by ISIS.

The Assyrians—and by extension, the Ninevites—were a wicked, pagan people. They pioneered brutal and unspeakable ways to torture and persecute others—specifically Israel. There are many historical reports of them filleting people, cutting them to pieces alive, and other such atrocities.

So when God tells Jonah to deliver a message of judgment, destruction, grace, and mercy, Jonah is both tickled pink and outraged. Jonah is super-excited that God wants to destroy the Ninevites, because…well, they deserve it! But on the flip side, he’s just as disgusted and angry that God is even considering forgiving them.

Ultimately, because of Jonah’s preaching to the Ninevites and their collective repentance, God relents and chooses not to destroy them. When this happens, Jonah decides to put God in His place by whining and complaining to Him about his frustration.

“But to Jonah this seemed very wrong [that God forgave the Ninevites instead of destroying them], and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord, ‘Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live’ " (Jonah 4:1-3, NIV).

The book ends with Jonah seemingly not getting the memo that God is kind and compassionate and seeks to extend mercy to all—the same mercy He extended to Jonah and his fellow Israelites!

Jonah’s stubborn, uncaring attitude smacks uncomfortably close to the attitudes of many Christians as we see the atrocities of ISIS unfold right before our eyes. If we say we love God and others, shouldn’t our response be to pray for God to bless them and bring them to repentance—not just destroy them?

Love…Your Enemies?


“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me” (Matt. 7:10, 11, NIV).

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. ‘You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 7:38-48, NIV).
WHAT?!

Did Jesus really mean what He said? That we are blessed when we’re persecuted? That we should give people our clothes and walk until we fall out? Did He want us to love, pray for, and “not resist” an evil person?

By the way, did you notice the stinging rebuke at the end? “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v. 48). Jesus is telling us not only that these strange behaviors are mandated, but that they are, only through His power, possible.

Here’s the more troubling question: Does Jesus want us to be Christian carpets and let others who seek to do us wrong just walk all over us?

Yes and no. Let me explain.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Rome, clarifies Jesus’ instruction through his unique perspective. Let’s not forget that Paul used to go by the name “Saul,” and he himself persecuted Christians—many to the point of death! He wrote:

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. … Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:14-21, NIV).

The Third Option

Paul—like Jesus—made it abundantly clear that we are not to seek revenge when persecuted. This emotion follows anger and is perfectly natural for all humanity, but as Christians we are not to respond this way.

Initially this command sounds like it is keeping “sweet revenge” from us. This world has fooled us into thinking that we are the end all of existence, and when somebody does something to us or those we love, we will make them pay! The truth is that payback never satisfies. Once a wrong has been committed, committing another wrong just exponentially increases the feelings of hurt and anger and does nothing to make the hurt go away. In fact, it continually keeps that hurt in front of us until that’s all we can focus on, and ultimately it will overwhelm and engulf us.

So if we shouldn’t pay back evil for evil, should we do…nothing? That’s not right either. God died for you and me, and that makes each one of us of inestimable value! God isn’t asking us to act as if the wrong shouldn’t and doesn’t hurt. That would be dysfunctional and dumb. That’s why Jesus and Paul both recognized that the best option is the third option: to let God take care of it. If we love Him, if we trust that He loves us, knows all, has all power, and is the perfect and ultimate Judge, then we can leave those wrongs in the safest place possible: His hands. He knows how and when to most effectively—perfectly, in fact—avenge injustices done to His children.

Hothead!

But surely that’s not the only thing God wants us to do? He doesn’t want the injustice to end with us saying, “Oh, well, I guess God will straighten it all out in the end,” as we twiddle our thumbs and shuffle our feet. You are correct! We are to start shoveling!

Paul, when writing about “heaping burning coals on his head” (v. 20), was referring to an Old Testament passage in Proverbs 25:21, 22. Paul wasn’t advocating piling heaping mounds of white-hot coals upon your enemies’ heads (as
deliciously tempting as that sounds). He was emphasizing that when Christianity comes in contact with evil and persecution, it goes beyond nonresistance to active benevolence. It does not destroy its enemies by violence but instead converts them by love. It feeds the enemy when he is hungry and satisfies his thirst. Admittedly, it is difficult to translate this idiomatic expression to our twenty-first-century cultural experience, but basically, to heap live coals on a person’s head is to make them ashamed of their hostility and persecution by surprising them with overwhelming and unconventional kindness. That is why Paul ends his instruction with this summary: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (v. 21). Again, this is something that can only be done through God’s power.

I know that the vast majority of those who read this won’t be receiving active persecution from ISIS—and I praise God for that! However, this principle of overwhelming love also applies to our everyday lives. I’m sure that as you read about the topic, a name, face, or situation popped into your head. No doubt you, like me, are experiencing cognitive dissonance between your actual responses and God’s ideal. So how do we resolve the problem and love sincerely by hating what is evil and clinging to what is good (Romans 12:9)?

Rubber Meets the Road

Years ago I read a book entitled What Would Jesus Do? The book dealt with characters struggling to make relevant and tangible changes to their lives in light of being convicted of Jesus’ teachings. It made me squirm a little and think a lot!

The truth is that there is nothing more difficult than dealing with someone whose sole purpose for living is to torment and persecute us or those we love. However, as we’ve learned, Jesus doesn’t give us a pass on this. If we call ourselves His followers—if we seek to be like Him—then we must respond as He would.

Today, I want to challenge you to do five things for those who purposely persecute you. Before I tell you what they are, I have to give you two disclaimers:

1. If you are dealing with someone who has been, as a pattern of their behavior, verbally or physically abusive or violent toward you, it would be wise—at least initially—to respond from a physical distance (i.e., e-mail, mail, text, phone call). If you fear for your physical safety, do not disclose details of your location.

2. The Bible describes some people as “fools.” For purposes of clarity, let’s define a fool as someone who:
   - is not cognitively deficient;
   - refuses to acknowledge God as the ultimate authority in their life (Ps. 14:1);
   - consistently and stubbornly continues to make negative life choices that consistently result in negative consequences;
   - even after having an awareness of the correct decisions to make, takes no responsibility for said actions;
   - blames others for their decisions and the consequences.

If you are dealing with a fool, the Bible says that the only way they will ever learn—if they learn at all—is by sheer negative consequences, and that we should remove ourselves from active daily interaction in their lives. Harsh but biblical.

OK, with those two disclaimers out of the way, let’s move forward with five ways to respond to persecution as Jesus would:

1. Pray for your persecutors.

Commit to pray for them daily. At this point, don’t inform them that you’re praying for them; remember, this isn’t about
you, but them! I’ve found that it’s difficult to pray for others for a sustained duration and hate them as well. What has usually happened with me and others I’ve counseled is that they begin to receive a paradigm shift in their perspective toward their persecutors. Instead of hating them and being angry at them, they begin to feel compassion and empathy toward them.

2. **Forgive them.**

Jesus—even in the midst of being crucified—offered forgiveness to His murderers (Luke 24:34). Jesus also reminds us that if we choose to be unforgiving, God cannot forgive us (Matt. 6:14, 15). Jesus isn’t being mean or hateful; the reality is that the heart that is too hard to open up and offer forgiveness to someone else is too hard to open up and accept God’s forgiveness.

Forgiveness doesn’t equal reconciliation—remember the disclaimers? If you are dealing with a violent, abusive, or foolish person, it’s not wise for you to have a relationship with them. However, forgiveness is something you do both because God forgave you and because it’s a best practice—spiritually, emotionally, and physically—for you! In his landmark book *Forgive to Live*, physician Dick Tibbitts talks about the importance of forgiveness. He cites incredible research showing that people who are unforgiving have a higher incidence of a vast number of emotional and physical disorders.

3. **Do something tangible for them.**

Several years ago my daughter was singled out for verbal bullying and abuse by an older girl. After my daughter spoke with her mother and me, she prayed about it and felt strongly impressed to begin to pray for this girl daily and also to pick some flowers and give them to her. That next week my daughter was pleasantly surprised to see a positive response from the young lady—and the bullying stopped.

Now, I know this story oversimplifies this principle. However, God wants us to—as far as possible—respond to hate with tangible acts of love. My wife has been known to bake her special recipe (actually it’s Laura Bush’s recipe—yes, the ex-president’s wife) for “Cowboy Cookies” and physically hand them to people she’s been battling. This has always initially confused the individuals and many times has stopped conflicts. You don’t have to bake stuff for people or give them flowers, but how about an iTunes gift card or a gift card for some gas? Pray, take time to listen to God’s Holy Spirit, and then do something for them.

4. **Attempt to empathize.**

Do you remember what my daughter wisely said about ISIS? “Hurt people hurt people. They’re doing that because they are angry and hurt because they don’t know Jesus.” Many people hate, hurt, torment, and persecute others because they themselves have all those things stored up inside them. Looking at ISIS, for generations—for millennia—in that part of the world people have been taught to hate, persecute, and kill others who don’t share their specific worldview, values, religion, beliefs, and genetic makeup. I say this not to excuse or justify their behaviors, but to communicate the importance of attempting to understand where someone is coming from and how that affects their behaviors.

Jesus Himself didn’t leave us in our sins but instead proactively sought us out (Rom. 5:8)—even loving us enough to become like one of us (John 1:1, 14; Heb. 4:15).

5. **Be open to building a relationship.**

It’s true that you may never be—or never want to be—“besties” with that person at church, work, or school who lives to make your life difficult, but remember that one of the main purposes for our existence on this earth is to make disciples for Jesus. You may not like it, but people are watching how you respond to and hold up under persecution. God tells us that our lives are like letters that others are reading (2 Cor. 3:2) and that we are God’s representatives here on earth (2 Cor. 5:20).
Do you remember that young lady who was so mean to my daughter? We got to know the family well, and we began to pray for her and her family daily. We shared many tangible gifts of food and books. We even invited them to our home for Sabbath dinner and heard their stories. Wow! They lived hard lives and had been through horrific and traumatic experiences. Eventually they agreed to begin attending weekly Bible studies at our home, and now our two families are friends.

Living on this earth in this time subjects us as Christians to Satan’s and the world’s anger, persecution, and torment (1 Cor. 1:18-31; John 10:10), and as world events continue to hurtle toward Jesus’ second coming, things will get much worse (Matt. 24:9-12, 21). However, we can be assured that no matter what happens, God will never leave us and will be with us to the very end (Matt. 28:20). In the meantime, we can respond to persecution and to our persecutors by allowing God to judge and avenge us. Then we are to address and emotionally process the wrong done to us by loving them as Jesus loves them through:

- praying for them,
- forgiving them,
- doing something tangible for them,
- seeking to understand them,
- being open to a relationship in order to ultimately lead them to salvation.

Let’s not be like knuckleheaded, stubborn Jonah, who never allowed God’s loving character to be displayed in his life. Let’s instead be like kind, compassionate Jesus and offer those who persecute us understanding and forgiveness.

If Jesus did it for us, how can we do any less for anyone else?
From Victim to Victor: Joseph’s Secrets for Thriving in the Worst of Circumstances

Adelina Alexe

He was about ten years of age when he moved to a foreign country, leaving behind his relatives, friends, and the place he used to call home. Somewhere on the way to his new homeland, he had to witness his mother’s burial. When the family reached Canaan, Joseph was a motherless child trying to make sense of the comings and goings of life and of his new surroundings.

The seven years he spent in his new dwelling were filled with hatred from his half-brothers. Their evil deeds, which he would not be part of[1], Joseph brought to his father. But Jacob’s inflated love for Joseph only fueled his brothers’ envy and hate. They would not speak a peaceful word to him. As a result, family tension and bickering were a constant part of his adolescence.

A Victim of Circumstances

When asked to check on his brothers, he journeyed for over sixty miles until he found them in Dothan[2], only to be stripped of his beautiful coat and thrown into a pit in a foiled murder. Eventually, he was sold as a slave, for the typical price of twenty shekels[3], to Ishmaelite Bedouins en route to Egypt. Joseph, a leader chosen by God, became a slave to the descendants of Abraham’s very own slave, Hagar, whom both he and Sarah sent away for mocking the chosen Isaac.[4]

At seventeen, abruptly separated from his father, estranged from his family and homeland, Joseph found himself in Egypt as a slave in Potiphar’s house. Here another misfortune awaited him. Like his mother, Rachel, Joseph had a beautiful figure and face.[5] They are the only two people in all of the Old Testament “awarded this double accolade,”[6] so they must have had exceptional good looks. But those who possess beauty and purity are sometimes prey to those who don’t. Potiphar’s wife began casting longing eyes at him and daily sought to persuade him to sleep with her. Despite Joseph’s caution, in an opportune moment, Potiphar’s rejected and vengeful wife wove a false story accusing Joseph of rape. With devious manipulations, the shameless woman played the victim while accusing the true victims, for she accused Joseph of rape and blamed her husband for bringing him in. As a result, Joseph was sent to prison.

Joseph spent his late twenties in prison. There, behind bars, he lived his innocent early adulthood days, suffering the consequences of selfish and cruel people in positions of power. At some point, a glimmer of hope finally met Joseph’s story as the butler, whom Joseph had encouraged with the interpretation of his dream, was set free and restored to his court job, in close proximity to the highest power in Egypt. It seemed that Joseph’s long-awaited chance for justice and freedom was closer than ever!

But the official went on with his life and forgot about Joseph. His forgetfulness cost Joseph two more years of prison. Thus, he suffered “another injury, less malicious but hardly less disillusioning. The chief butler did not set out to do him any harm; he simply did nothing at all.”[7] Not only must this have felt like another injustice, but neglect is most often perceived as proof of insignificance. He was, after all, just a jailed foreign slave.

Motherless, envied, betrayed, separated from family, exiled, enslaved, unfairly accused, unjustly punished, forgotten: that was Joseph’s life from the age of 10 to 30. These experiences encompassed his adolescence, youth, and early adulthood.

One might expect little from someone plagued with such dire circumstances, a victim of all kinds of evil deeds.
Joseph was brought lower and lower by his relatives, owners, and eventually even prisoners in his custody. Powerless, trapped in his brothers’ betraying arms, confined in a pit, captive in the hands of the Ishmaelites, restricted as a slave in Potiphar’s house, caged in prison, he had so little control over himself and the direction of his life. He seemed to be a captive to circumstances and a victim of fate. Even if he was ever freed, would he become the abused abuser?

In an incredible twist of events, after thirteen years of being enslaved by strangers and betrayed by those closest to him, Joseph ascended almost overnight to become the highest in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. At the opportune time, the butler remembered him as a trustworthy interpreter of dreams. Joseph warned the pharaoh that seven years of famine would follow seven of plenty and suggested a survival strategy that found favor with the entire royal court.

From that moment on it was as if the knot of his misfortunes was untangled and his entire life reversed toward normal. He was freed, elevated, and eventually reunited with his converted family. The boy once stripped of his colorful tunic and his freedom by hateful brothers, the young man once robbed of his garment and his liberty by Potiphar’s wife, stood before Egypt as a ruler dressed in the finest linen.

Secret 1: Stewardship

Before his slavery, Joseph dreamed two dreams. These God-given dreams set off the spiral of abuse that he received at the hands of others. It is ironic and sad that a gift from God can become a curse in the hands of ungodly people. Yet through the years of trials, it was these dreams and their Giver that Joseph held on to. And while waiting for his dreams to be fulfilled, Joseph neither sat idly nor succumbed to despair. Instead, he practiced stewardship.

Through his stewardship, Joseph played an active role in making his dreams come true, even though he likely didn’t know he was doing just that. In the end, his choice to put his talents to use in each hostile circumstance saved not only him, but the Egyptian nation and his father’s entire household as well. His story, from betrayal to restoration and beyond, is peppered with hints and examples of his good stewardship.

At Potiphar’s house, he got busy being prosperous under God’s blessing. When he had an opportunity for an affair with his master’s wife, he refused it. Joseph took his work responsibilities too seriously to have time for risky games. As someone wisely wrote, “Work which enlists a man’s energies and gives him contented self-expression is always a safeguard against sensuality. It is those who lunge about in uselessness, the ‘play boys,’ who have nothing to do with imagination but let the doors to it swing open in the easiest way, that are like ramshackle houses into which every disreputable guest can find an entrance.”[8]

Of course, Joseph could have reasoned a way to justify his sin. He could have seen Potiphar’s wife as needy or neglected. He could have considered possible advantages to meeting her desires. After all, he might have gained his freedom, or he could have simply wanted to have fun. Excuses for defeat are plentiful and easy to find. But aside from being a good steward of his work responsibilities, Joseph was a good steward of his body, his needs, and his actions. Instead of saying “How could I not do it?” Joseph said “How could I do it?”[9] He knew that even when no one else knew, his responsibility to God was paramount.

In prison, he again got busy being productive, so much so that the prison’s keeper committed everything to Joseph. Yet even while working hard, Joseph was not too busy to ask about how those he served were doing. In this way he was also a good steward of his relationships. When the baker and butler were saddened after dreams they’d had, Joseph stepped in. He “came in to them in the morning and looked at them, and saw that they were sad. So he asked Pharaoh’s officers who were with him in the custody of his lord’s house, saying, ‘Why do you look so sad today?’” (Gen. 40:6-7, NKJV).

This passage records four actions of Joseph: he came, he looked, he saw, and he asked. You can refuse to come to those you serve, or you can come but not look. One might even look but not see, or see and yet never ask. But in going about his business, Joseph never neglected the emotional state of people in his proximity and care.
Joseph had suffered much abuse and injustice. Yet if he “had spent his time and energy nursing his grievances … he would not have had the clear-eyed and controlled perception to recognize the new possibilities that God put in his way.”[10] The victim’s victory over depression and despair was found in being fruitful through good stewardship. In all unfavorable circumstances, Joseph found favor in the eyes of each one of his masters: Potiphar, the prison’s overseer, and eventually Pharaoh and his entire court. Joseph’s stewardship is what allowed God to fulfill his destiny. It turned the land of exile into a land of fruitfulness, the land of despair into a land of hope, and the land of death into a land of life.

By all appearances, Joseph had every right to turn sour. Yet he wasn’t “reactive, resentful, disillusioned, cynical, angry, revengeful, defiant, corrupted, or rebellious.”[11] Although abused by those in positions of power over him, he served and showed genuine interest for those under his power. Later, when he gained much more power, he did not misuse it as others had. Instead, the same attitude of service followed him. He clothed, nourished, and gave a home to his brothers who had once stripped him of his coat, sat down to eat while he cried in the pit, and alienated him from his homeland. Joseph was able to feel genuine concern for others because even when abused by humans in power, he knew that above them, he was under the custody of the highest Power in the universe. The Archmaster, who was with him constantly and blessed everything he did, was his ultimate example.

Secret 2: Peace

What threatens our good stewardship is not always external peril. Often—if not always—some internal conflict is what leads us away from our responsibilities and hinders us from developing our gifts. Joseph was a captive by external circumstances. But in all of his captivity, the power of God working within him was stronger than the circumstances.

The power of the captive was his free conscience. Inside, he was freer than all who abused and accused him. For thirteen years, Joseph's brothers experienced remorse and recrimination more enslaving than Joseph’s slavery in Egypt.[12] When Joseph tested his brothers, “the outward disaster cracked the[ir] inward repression.”[13] Joseph, on the other hand, could thrive in the worst of external circumstances because he had God’s inner peace.

In the power of that peace, the captive was free to be a good steward in adversity. He was faithful on the way to Dothan, faithfully fulfilled his responsibilities at Potiphar’s house, and expressed his concern for the prisoners, one by one. He was also a faithful steward in his management of Egypt’s resources, one day, month, and year at a time.

The Steward’s Blessing

The chosen are not chosen in order to lie in a bed of roses; they are chosen because they can walk on a path of thorns and remain faithful. Along the way, the chosen often suffer injustice, neglect, lies, punishment, but “the land of affliction is often the fruitful land—fruitful in patience, faith, courage, fortitude, victory.”[14] Being open to develop your gifts; being willing to live at your best even when betrayed, lied to, forgotten, and neglected; being willing to thrive even in the worst of circumstances will allow God to take you through a journey of transformation.

When the loving God is our ultimate example, through years and years of abuse, we can eventually accept our wounds as balm for the healing of even our fiercest enemies. When we are willing to grow through pain, when we choose to focus on what is in our control and let God make our life flourish, we discover that we are not the victim, but the victor. Our openness to receive the blessing of God’s guidance, example, and support will turn us into a blessing for others.

Sometimes the sun comes out not after the rain, but in the midst of a storm. That’s when the most beautiful rainbows are born.

Notes:


[6] Ibid.


