



God is Love, God is Love

Brian Zahnd

The topography of biblical witness is full of peaks and valleys, mountains and plains. The Bible is not flat terrain. The honest reader of the Bible readily admits that the Levitical prohibition against eating shellfish does not reach the same heights as the lofty Christology in Colossians. As we look at the great peaks of inspired biblical witness, none soar higher than the twin peaks of divine revelation given to us by the Apostle John.

*“But anyone who does not love does not know God, for **God is love**. ... We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love. **God is love**, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.”* (1 John 4:8, 16)

Soaring above everything else the Bible has to say about God are these twin peaks found in John’s first epistle:

God is love, God is love.

The Arapaho Indians called Longs Peak and Mount Meeker [above] *Nesótaieus*, meaning “two guides.” The two peaks of this towering massif are useful for orientation when traveling in the front range of the Colorado Rocky Mountains, just as the two peaks of 1 John 4:8 and 4:16 are invaluable when navigating our way through the Bible. When the aged apostle put quill to papyrus to tell his readers that God is love (twice), and that to know love is to know God, and that to live in love is to live in God, he was making a daring move—and he dared to do it!

Higher Up the Holy Mountain

More than a thousand years earlier, Moses reaches his apex of revelation when he hears and reports the voice of God from the burning bush saying, *“I Am Who I Am.”* But John leads us higher up

the holy mountain when he reveals that *God is Love*. These two guides on the holy mountain work together to lead us to the summit of divine revelation: God is who God is—and God is love. If we ever reach the top and catch a glimpse from the *God is Love* summit of the holy mountain, it changes the way we look at everything.

The view from the base of the mountain, or even halfway up, is simply not the same as from the summit. If we can follow John’s lead to the summit of the holy mountain of scriptural revelation, we will see the whole Bible in a new light.

God is not wrath. Though we may rightly understand and describe the consequences of divine consent to our own self-destructive will as the wrath of God, the truth remains that God is not wrath; **God is Love**.

God is not a bloodthirsty deity requiring ritual killing. Though

this may have been the only way we could understand God four millennia ago on the lower flanks of the holy mountain, the truth remains that God is not bloodthirsty; **God is Love.**

God is not violence. Despite the fact that religion has a long history of sacralizing violence by projecting it on God, the truth remains that **God is Love.**

God does not operate an eternal torture chamber. However we understand the state of a postmortem soul incapable of love, the truth remains that God is not a sadistic torturer inflicting eternal pain; **God is Love.**

God is not a killer. Though many have misread the book of Revelation to such an extent that they think God's final solution for sin is the "Final Solution," the truth remains that God is not a genocidal killer; **God is Love.**

The wages of sin is death—but **God is Love.**

War is hell—but **God is Love.**

Violence is human—but **God is Love.**

The God We Want

At this point I can hear the critics howl: "You're just making God the way you want God to be!" No. That's not what I'm doing. I was quite content to believe in and preach an angry, violent, retributive God. I did so for decades. I did it convincingly. I did it successfully.

You can build a big church preaching such a God. Fear is a powerful motivator. Religious people generally like to be told that God is like that, as long as the divine disposition of anger is primarily directed toward other people.

The way I wanted God to be was the way I assumed God was: angry, violent, retributive. I knew how to use the Bible to preach God this way and I wasn't interested in changing my theology. If my motivation were to make God the way I wanted God to be, I would still be lifting passages from Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hand of a Angry God" to add rhetorical flourishes to my angry God sermons.

The change that occurred in my theology came about, not by wishing for God to be something other than I

assumed God was, but from actually discovering God as revealed in Christ.

The God Revealed in Christ

My turn away from an angry, violent, retributive vision of God began after I had turned forty, and while reading Augustine's *Confessions*. Saint Augustine's spiritual memoir moved me to pray what may have been the most important prayer of my life: "*God, I want to spend the rest of my life discovering you as you are revealed in Christ.*" That prayer in June of 2000 launched me upon a journey of theological discovery that I have recounted in my spiritual memoir, *Water To Wine*.

Following cairns set up by climbers of the holy mountain who have gone before me has led me away from the primitive and mistaken notions of an angry, violent, retributive God, and toward the Father who is fully revealed in Christ. The Apostle John says this **God is love.**

In the conclusion of his

"Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" sermon, Jonathan Edwards says, "The axe is in an extraordinary manner laid at the root of the trees, that every tree that brings not forth good fruit, may be hewn down, and cast into the fire."

And I say, "Amen." I thank God that the theological tree that produced the bitter fruit of belief in an angry, violent, retributive God has at last been hewn down and cast into the fire. In my life, the poisonous tree of angry-God theology is now gone. In its place grows the *Tree of Life*—a tree whose leaves bring healing (Revelation 22:2). It's a tree that looks like it once may have been an ugly cross, but is now beautiful and verdant, producing the fruit of eternal life. Planted by the Father himself, this tree is an everlasting reminder that I am a forgiven sinner now being healed in the hands of a loving God. □

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On the summit of Mount Meeker on a day when my son Philip and I climbed both Meeker and Longs.