

***I've been reading the Bible and I've run into a problem. The God I'm reading about in the Old Testament doesn't seem to be the same God I've come to know my whole life. He seems angry. It seems like He kills people left and right. I don't get it and it is really unsettling.***

This is a very difficult question. In this limited space, and not trying to “explain away” certain factors, let's try to get somewhere with this huge dilemma.

First, God is not fickle. This means He does not get happy one minute and angry the next. He does not actually “change His mind” and decide that He doesn't like someone. This was one of the problems with the pagan gods. They were never trustworthy. They were constantly needing to be appeased and flattered. The God of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures reveals that He is nothing like that. Even when God asks to be worshipped it is not for His sake, but for the sake of those who are worshipping.

The Bible and the Church reveal that God is One. He does not change. He is constant. He is always good. He is not fickle; you can trust Him. So what do we do about these troubling passages?

The problem sometimes begins with the way we read the Bible. We don't always do it the way it was meant to be read. We sometimes read each word as having the same importance or the same perspective as every other word. As you may know, the Bible is actually a collection of books written by various authors over time. While constantly guided by the Holy Spirit (so that we can truly say that the Holy Spirit is the author of the sacred books of the Bible), the human authors wrote according to their own styles, genres, intelligence, and cultural background. Because of this, the Bible contains many “figures of speech” regarding God. It will say things like, “God regretted that He...” or “God grew angry with His people”. Now, this does not mean that God actually went, “Doh! If only had done it differently!” It is simply a figure of speech that reveals that God was somehow “moved” by the actions of the people He created and loved. (Even my saying that God was “moved” is problematic; God is immutable, how can an unchanging God be “moved”? Words fail me at this point.)

Because of this, we need to understand that certain phrases which hint at anger are not to be read at face value. They are attempts to put into human words something that is beyond human words (namely, God).

But we have passages where God commands a town to be completely destroyed (Jericho) or where God destroys a town or two himself (Sodom and Gomorrah). What's the deal?

Death is a bad thing. We know it. The Bible affirms it. The Book of Wisdom asserts “God did not make death, nor does he rejoice in the destruction of the living” (Wisdom 1:13). So even God does not desire anyone to die. And yet, we believe in justice. Whether or not we always want justice at a particular moment,

we know that justice is a good. It is always a good, even if I want something other than strict justice for myself sometimes.

Justice could be defined as giving someone what they deserve; what is owed them. All Jews and Christians believe that we will be judged by God at some point. We know that this judgment will be absolutely fair and just. God will not judge out of anger or vindictiveness, but out of truth. God sees the surface (our actions) but he also sees the heart (the motivations and circumstances behind our actions). He will judge with fairness and full-knowledge.

Nonetheless, we will someday be definitively judged. Kind of a “once and for all” judgment. This is because our choices are real. They are real and significant. The people of Jericho were judged as well. So were the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. The judgment was no different, it was merely “sooner”. But timing has nothing to do with the rightness or wrongness of the Judge. In these cases, God is “visiting his judgment” on the peoples. This judgment is not rash, vindictive or emotional. It is simply the consequence that each one of us awaits.

Some people will be judged today...and they won't be expecting it. Some people still have decades before they will have to answer for their choices. But we all have to recognize the fact that our choices have consequences. The Bible teaches that the “wages of sin is death”. Another way of saying it is, “the consequence of choosing sin is death”.

In Jesus, God does not cancel out justice (how or why would God cancel out a good? And remember, justice is always a good). But he does something even more, he offers another good: mercy. But that is a topic for next month.