

## *Love & Hate*

<sup>CEB</sup> **Psalm 130:1** I cry out to you from the depths, LORD-- <sup>2</sup> my Lord, listen to my voice! Let your ears pay close attention to my request for mercy! <sup>3</sup> If you kept track of sins, LORD-- my Lord, who would stand a chance? <sup>4</sup> But forgiveness is with you-- that's why you are honored. <sup>5</sup> I hope, LORD. My whole being hopes, and I wait for God's promise. <sup>6</sup> My whole being waits for my Lord-- more than the night watch waits for morning; yes, more than the night watch waits for morning! <sup>7</sup> Israel, wait for the LORD! Because faithful love is with the LORD; because great redemption is with our God! <sup>8</sup> He is the one who will redeem Israel from all its sin.

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There's an old expression about not being able to see the forest for the trees. It means that we can get lost in the details and lose sight of the overall picture. This is especially common if you are surrounded by difficulties at the moment. Every now and then, we need to back off and take a look at the bigger picture. So this morning we'll try to do just that by looking at God's loving and hating in the Bible.

The Hebrews had their roots in the mists of time, descending from a man named Abraham. His great-grandchildren and the generations that followed were slaves in Egypt, but God rescued them from bondage and led them through the Sinai wilderness to go live in the area we now call Israel and Palestine. On this pilgrimage from bondage to freedom they stopped at Mount Sinai where their leader, Moses, went up on the mountain to meet God and receive instructions. And it was at this point that God tells Moses what sort of God he is dealing with.

**Exodus 34:6-7a** "The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."

Through the years, as the Hebrews reflected on their God, they used many of those same phrases to describe who they worshipped.

**Numbers 14:18** "The LORD is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression"

Looking back to those early days, Nehemiah described God as faithful to an unfaithful people. "You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them. <sup>18</sup> Even when they had cast an image of a calf for themselves and committed great blasphemies, <sup>19</sup> you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. <sup>20</sup> You gave your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and gave them water for their thirst. <sup>21</sup> Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness so that they lacked nothing. (Nehemiah 9:17-21)

After they settled in the land of Israel, they were a loose confederation of tribes. Problems would arise, often because of their own misbehavior or neglect. Over a period of several centuries, the people would get into difficulty, God would raise up a leader from among them who, with divine guidance, would rescue the tribes from the threats and problems. The book of Judges speaks of thirteen crises, thirteen leaders, thirteen rescues. Although the people were repeatedly unfaithful to God, God was patient; God was steadfast in loving, forgiving, and rescuing. It's no wonder that, as that period in their history drew to a close, the writer of First Chronicles exclaimed, "O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever." (1Chronicles 16:34)

Next came the period when kings ruled over Israel. Quite frankly, over the next few centuries the kings generally became worse and worse. They often led the people into idolatry

and generally turned their back on God. But God raised up prophets to preach to the people and to hold the kings accountable for their unfaithfulness.

“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: <sup>22</sup> The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; <sup>23</sup> they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” (Lamentations 3:21-23)

“Let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD.” (Jeremiah 9:24)

“Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your hearts, with fasting, with weeping, and with sorrow; <sup>13</sup> tear your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, very patient, full of faithful love, and ready to forgive.” (Joel 2:12-13)

As I searched through all of the Bible with a powerful software concordance, I got a comprehensive overview of all of the passages that talk about God’s love. The list is enormous, especially in the Old Testament! And there’s even one instance where God’s compassion and steadfast love really makes someone mad. The prophet Jonah was sent to preach God’s word to an archenemy, the city of Nineveh. Jonah hated this traditional enemy and God’s character upset Jonah. He said, “O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” (Jonah 4:2)

The hymn book of the Hebrew people, the collection of songs that we know as the book of Psalms, has an overwhelming number of references to the immense unfailing love of God. Over and over, the Psalms speak of God as slow to anger, filled with abundant mercy, and steadfast in love. Some Psalms are so focused on God’s love that they speak of it repeatedly. Psalm 89 proclaims God’s love seven times! Psalm 136 speaks of God’s steadfast love twenty – six times!

In the New Testament, the four gospels are filled with the loving and compassionate acts of Jesus as he lived a life illustrating God’s love. And the apostle John in his first letter, boldly defines God as love itself.

<sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. (1John 4:8 NRS)

<sup>16</sup> So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. (1John 4:16 NRS)

The love of God abounds in scripture. It is proclaimed by the faithful and illustrated in God’s relationship with humans. But what about hate? You have to look closely to find any reference to God’s hate. Here are a couple:

**Psalm 5:4-6** For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil will not sojourn with you. <sup>5</sup> The boastful will not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. <sup>6</sup> You destroy those who speak lies; the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful.

You can provoke God. You can make God angry. **Isaiah 1:13-14** Bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation-- I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. <sup>14</sup> Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.

Obviously God is insulted by empty worship. God isn’t pleased when we just go through the motions. God wants more than ceremony; God wants our devotion, our trust, and our love. But the passages about the hatred of God seem to be not about God’s personality and character, but more about how we can, if we try hard, make God angry at us.

You might ask, “Well aren’t we overlooking a huge example of God’s hatred? What about the flood? Where’s the constant love and mercy in that event?”

We tend to get as far as Noah getting the animals into the ark and then everybody else drowning and we quit. But the story continues. When all is said and done, the flood doesn’t wash all iniquity and evil off the face of the earth. Even Noah lapses into unseemly behavior and the generations that follow show that they can misbehave as enthusiastically as the people before the flood. The story ends, not by evil being removed from the earth, but, instead by God changing and promising to never do that again. **Genesis 8:21b-22** "I will never again . . . destroy every living creature as I have done. <sup>22</sup> As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."

Centuries later, Isaiah reports that God remembered the covenant with Noah and expands on it. **Isaiah 54:9-10** This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. <sup>10</sup> For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

Why have so many people described God as full of anger, wrath, and hate, despite the great emphasis in the Bible about God’s love, compassion, and patience? I suspect that some cannot imagine that anybody would ever choose to behave - except out of fear of being punished. Children who are raised in constant fear of punishment for any and every failure are likely to grow up to be troubled adults with a low degree of mental health. Children who are raised in a loving family by parents that affirm their worth and deal patiently with their shortcomings are likely to grow up to be loving, productive members of society and blessed with good mental stability. Why would we not see parallels in our relationship with God?

I fear that there is a darker and more tragic reason why some have proclaimed a God of wrath and hate. It can be a way of exerting power over people, especially if the preacher or the church is portrayed as having the exclusive path to forgiveness and able to provide relief from guilt and rescue from punishment. Some give in to the temptation to exert power over others.

PSALM 130 - “I cry out to you from the depths, LORD-- <sup>2</sup> my Lord, listen to my voice! Let your ears pay close attention to my request for mercy!” All of us, no matter how rich or poor, no matter how smart, no matter how much education we have, no matter what our job is or who our parents are – all of us at various times face serious illness, have family members die, lose jobs, lose friends, or suffer in any number of other ways. And the psalmist knows this and cries out from those depths of pain. In that cry, the psalmist expresses a profound faith that God is present, God hears, and God is able and willing to act. This is an expression of faith, of trust that a *nobody* in deep trouble can be heard at the throne of heaven by the ruler of the universe.

<sup>3</sup> If you kept track of sins, LORD-- my Lord, who would stand a chance? <sup>4</sup> But forgiveness is with you-- that's why you are honored. What’s this? Here’s a declaration that God isn’t making a list and checking it twice to keep a record of who’s naughty and who’s nice! God isn’t eagerly looking for you to mess up. Instead, it is characteristic of God to forgive. The authority to forgive and the disposition to forgive belong to the Lord. Forgiveness isn’t about us, it’s about God. God forgives so that God can be revered. The forgiveness isn’t a result, not an act derived from some previous cause. It is the **FIRST** act. This psalm plainly states the scandal – the gift goes before the obedience!! With **THIS GOD**, there is the readiness to cancel iniquity and to begin again.

Real power isn’t about punishing; it’s about having the opportunity to punish and forgiving instead. God’s sovereignty is not exercised in sheer force, but in the immense power of committed love. We are to live in awe, reverence, and respect of God because God forgives.

God's love – or God's hate? Romans 8:38-39 "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Amen!

Sisters and Brothers,  
We can make God angry with us  
But it is God's character to forgive  
So that we might live in reverence.  
Nothing can separate us from God's love.