

2. No Delusion - The Real God of the Old Testament: A Passionate God

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn, shall we, to Exodus chapter 3. And as I said, we're looking at the real God of the Old Testament.

And tonight, we learn that he's a passionate God. And that means that you can love him because he has already loved you.

It's a second in our studies of Exodus chapter 3. And we're looking at the real God of the Old Testament. That is really in response to many claims that are made about the God of Scripture. But in particular, I suppose, by Richard Dawkins in this book that we quoted from last week, *The Delusional God*. And you remember he calls him, quote, the cruel ogre of the Old Testament. And with these and many other such slanderous things, he describes the God that we know and love and worship and serve. You remember all the other descriptions that I read out last week.

[1 : 08] I'm not going to read them again. But there are plenty others like that in this book. And I have to say, having read the book, it really is one of the most patronizing diatribes that I've ever really read anywhere about anything.

And I think also, I'd have to say, one of the most ignorant. It struck me that if people read Dr. Dawkins' scientific papers with the same kind of scornful presuppositions and absurd, well, absurd literary insensitivity that he appears to read the Bible with, then I think he'd be absolutely outraged, and rightly so.

Anyway, so much for Dr. Dawkins. The only further thing I'll say is that I'm afraid he really is rather dishonest, as a man who writes a book like that, I think, in that he's happy to write a book with all these kinds of outrageous claims, and yet he's very reluctant to defend them in public, it seems. In fact, on page 281 of the book, he celebrates the fact that he refuses to debate in public with Christians. It's interesting. He says in there on that page, 281, that he doesn't have enough chutzpah to refuse on the grounds of one of his fellow scientists.

One of his fellow scientists, he says, likes to say this, when he's asked to debate with a Christian, well, that would look very good on your CV, but not so good on mine. Pretty arrogant, isn't it? He says he doesn't quite have the gall to do that, although, in fact, I heard just last year that those were exactly the words he did use when he was asked to debate with the American apologist, William Lane Craig.

[2 : 48] So, obviously, he's growing in his chutzpah. Well, so much for Dr. Dawkins' claims. By the way, another thing that Dawkins... I keep coming back to him, don't I? Well, there we are, finally.

There may be a few more finalies. Here's an interesting thing. Listen to how he defines faith. Holding a belief without adequate reason for doing so.

Well, if that's what faith is, then people who have faith are bound to be idiots, aren't they? But, of course, that's never, ever, ever what the Bible means by faith. Never does the Bible mean that faith is a leap into the dark.

Always, the Bible says, faith is a step into the light of truth. The light of truth based on clear, observable, verifiable evidence. Yes, revelation of the truth of God, but evidence in words and in actions that can be seen and heard and understood by the human mind.

And faith, as far as the Bible is concerned, is simply recognizing the truth and submitting to it. And stopping holding on to sinful delusions in defiance of clear evidence to the truth.

[4 : 03] That's what the Bible means by faith. And that's what chapter 3 of the book of Exodus is all about. It's evidence revealed to Moses about who God really is.

So let's look at that evidence. As I said, I want to concentrate tonight on verses 7 to 10 of Exodus 3. If we do, we'll find that this God is not the cruel ogre of Dr. Dawkins.

In fact, he's quite the opposite. We've already seen that he is a personal God. Verses 1 to 6. He's a God, we saw, who is the personal God of his people.

Yes, he is a God who's unapproachably holy. Therefore, he's dangerous to sinful human beings.

That was the message we saw this morning, wasn't it? In 2 Samuel chapter 6. The dangerousness of God's holiness.

But, at the same time, he is a God who makes himself approachable. Of course, only on his terms. Moses, take off your sandals. You can't just be casual.

[5 : 05] The place on which you walk is holy ground. But God makes himself approachable, even in his fearsome holiness. And, we also saw, remember, that although he is certainly a God who is perennially failed by his people, yet he is a God who is persistently faithful to them.

He's the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. All of whom have faltered. All of whom have failed many times. We're seeing in Genesis. But he is their God, still, despite all.

But now, in chapter 3, verses 7 to 10, we see that he's not only a personal God, a God of his people forever, but he's a passionate God.

Now, the reality of the evidence in the Bible itself is very clear. Far from God being a capricious, malevolent bully, as Richard Dawkins describes him, he's not that at all.

We look at the evidence, we find he's a tender God. He's a loving God. He's a feeling Father, whose own heart bleeds for his children. And all the more so, when he sees their misery and their distress.

[6 : 19] I think you can see that clearly in these verses, can't you? Let's just look at three simple things that we see about God in these verses. First of all, he's a God with seeing eyes and hearing ears, isn't he?

Look at verse 7. The Lord said, For I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. This is a God who looks upon his people as the apple of his eye.

And he's looking out for them all the time. His eye is upon them. And his ear is attuned to them and to their needs all the time in their distress. His ear is open.

And it's open so that when he hears their cry, he's ready to act on their behalf. He hears the cries of his people. Is that a picture of a cruel ogre?

I don't think so. It's really the picture of a mother, isn't it? Yes, God is our Father. There's no confusion there at all. Of course not.

[7 : 26] And yet, God himself does say of himself, doesn't he? As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you. Isaiah 66, read it yourself. And God is just like that.

He's watching. He's listening out for his children. Look back to chapter 2, verse 24. It's there again, isn't it? And God heard their groaning. And God remembered his covenant, the bond of love that he has with his people.

And God saw the people of Israel. And God knew. You see the implication, don't you? When God hears the cry of his people, he doesn't just ignore the cry.

He doesn't cover his ears up so he doesn't hear it anymore. He doesn't remain unmoved in his heart by the cry. No, he acts on that cry, having heard it.

He acts to help his children in distress, doesn't he? Not so long ago that Juliet, our second daughter, was very small.

[8 : 30] And I remember when we were living in London. And she was an absolute terror of the night. She would scream and squawk for hours and hours and hours all night long.

And I got to the stage where we would have to put her caught in the farthest away place of the house and shut all the doors in between and wear earplugs. And even then, it was very difficult to get sleep.

And I have to say that I got to be very good at putting my earplugs in, getting the pillow over my head in a certain way, and having a certain expression on my face that showed I was definitely asleep and was not hearing and was definitely not getting up, lest something close to murder might take place.

And my dear wife was always up to tend to our daughter Juliet. I always said that if Juliet had been born first, I never would have been a Joanna. But there we are. But you see, this God is not like me,

with my earplugs in and the pillow over my head.

He hears. And it's an act of hearing. And like a loving mother, and even I at times did get up and help, he hears and he acts.

[9 : 47] And we all know that as parents, don't we? Whether we're mothers or fathers, I hope. There is a time, isn't there, sometimes when we hear a cry of distress from our child. And no matter what we're doing, we drop everything. And we're rushing there immediately.

Because we hear a cry of real distress, don't we? As parents, we get to tell those two things apart very quickly, don't we? The type of cry, the squabbling cry, the scream that's all about fights and the gurning and that kind of thing, and the cry of real distress.

And we filter one of them out, don't we? We learn to do that quickly. And yet the other one, well, we're up like a shot, aren't we? Straight there. Because we know something really serious has happened. They've fallen.

They've broken a bone or something like that. And God is like that too, isn't he? The Bible tells us that. Our cries of squabbling, of petulance, well, he ignores them.

He screens them out. He puts his earplugs in. Just read it all through the prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah especially. Presumptuous prayer. Self-justification from his people.

[10 : 49] God says, I will not hear those prayers. I will not respond to those sacrifices. I'll make myself deaf. But the humble prayer, the cry of distress, audible or inaudible, from our hearts, reaching out to God, he hears that prayer always.

And he acts. I have seen, he says, the affliction. I have heard the cry because of the taskmasters, because of the slavers. He's a God who sees and a God who hears.

And it's not just a hearing that's mechanical. It's not just something merely automatic. It's far more than that. It's passionate. It's passionate.

Deeply cares and is involved. Look at the second thing. He's not just, is it, a seeing eye or a hearing ear. He's a God, says verse 7, with a knowing heart. I know their sufferings.

Not just an impassioned or a disinterested seeing and hearing. He's a passionate God. He knows their sufferings. That doesn't mean just that he knows about it.

[11 : 56] It means far, far more than that. Far more than that. He's involved in it. He knows it deeply. It pains him when his people have pain.

Somehow, God is himself involved in the very suffering of his people. I know their suffering, he says. Now, sometimes theologians argue over something called God's impassibility.

And they get very worked up about the idea that God can suffer. Now, of course, it's true that God cannot be ultimately harmed in any way.

God cannot suffer any loss to his being. He can't be defeated by any of his creatures because he's God. If he could be, he wouldn't be Almighty God, would he? Let me just digress for a moment or two here because these are some important theological issues.

And it's important that we should get these sort of things clear in our mind. We need to know what we do mean and what we don't mean when we say that God is self-sufficient.

[13 : 04] When we say that God is absolutely unchangeable. When we say that it's impossible for God to suffer any loss. Let me just talk to that theological point just for a minute.

First of all, the Bible makes abundantly clear to us that God is utterly self-sufficient. He's utterly self-contained. The theologians call that God's aseity.

From the Latin, ase, meaning of or from or by himself. Let me read you a little portion from the Westminster Confession of Faith about this. God has all life, glory, goodness, blessedness in and of himself.

And is alone in and unto himself, all sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures he has made. His knowledge is infinite, infallible and independent upon the creature.

So as nothing is to him contingent or uncertain. Quite complex, isn't it? But do you notice? He is in and of himself.

[14 : 09] He is in and unto himself all sufficient. That's God's aseity. The Bible is absolutely clear on this.

All of the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, as we sang in the psalm this morning. God has no needs. And although he can put himself under obligations to human beings by making promises and covenants and so on.

These are all according to his will. He is sovereign. He is not imposed upon by anyone ever. Maybe the best place to see that is in Acts chapter 17.

It's worth just turning there to read it. Because it's a very helpful passage that Paul speaks to the Athenian philosophers. And he reminds them of this. If you look at Acts chapter 17 at verse 24. And read down to verse 30. You'll see that that's exactly what Paul is saying. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man.

[15:10] Nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything. Since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth.

Having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place. That they should seek God in the hope that they might feel their way towards him and find him. Yet he's actually not far from any one of us.

For in him we live and move and have our being. As even some of your own poets have said. For we are indeed his offspring. Being then God's offspring. We ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone.

An image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked. But now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

See that's God's aseity. He doesn't depend on anyone or anything. For anything. In fact we depend utterly on him for absolutely everything. God is absolutely self-sufficient.

[16:12] He's absolutely self-contained. And that means it follows as the Westminster Confession also states. That he is totally independent of all his creatures.

God is not contingent upon us in any way. That means he's not in any way vulnerable to suffering harm or loss to his being in any way at the hands of anybody else.

By the actions say of any of his creatures. By us. That's why the Westminster Confession says God is infinite in being and perfection. A most pure spirit.

Invisible without body, parts or passions. Immutable. God is without passions. He's impassable.

To use the fancy posh term. And you see that's where people begin to get confused. Because that seems to give a picture of God without passion.

[17:13] Without emotions. Or without feelings or cares. A God who's aloof and uncaring and unfeeling. A God who's indifferent to his creatures, to their plight.

A God who's like a stone or like an iceberg. As some have claimed. Now of course, there's two immediate problems, aren't there, with that kind of idea.

First of all, it isn't at all appealing, is it? In fact, it's very unappealing to think of a God like that. But secondly, of course, it doesn't seem to fit the Bible's descriptions of God at all, does it?

Because the Bible does describe feelings and passions to God. Just as we read right here in Exodus chapter 3 in our passage. He knows our sufferings. Now some people, and this would especially be those who call themselves open theists.

You might have heard that term, open theism. Some have, because of this apparent idea of an impassionate God. A God who is impassable being distant and remote and aloof.

[18:15] They've proposed a different idea of God. They reject that kind of iceberg God. And they want to say, no, God is a God who can be wounded.

And who can be afflicted. And whose plans can be thwarted. And whose will is stymied often and is contingent upon his creatures. Because, and this is why they claim this, because only that kind of God can be capable of true love.

And really meaningful affections. An immutable God, an unchangeable God, a truly sovereign God. They say, he's just not capable of being relational in those ways.

Not at all. And so, as one writer has put it, open theists have placed God into the hands of angry sinners. That's a play, of course, on a famous sermon by Jonathan Edwards.

In other words, they've de-godded God. God is no longer the sovereign, self-sufficient, self-contained being who depends on no one, but gives to everyone. But I want to ask you the question, is that the only alternative?

[19:23] Is there only the alternative the iceberg God, the distant God, the unfeeling one, the uncaring one, who is sovereign? Or a vulnerable God, a changeable God?

A God who suffers at man's hand? But the God with feelings and emotions and passions? Well, no, of course that's not the choice that we have to make.

Like so many theological errors, the proponents of that kind of idea, open theism, well, they just set up a straw man, which they then proceed to knock down when they attack the doctrine of God's unchangeableness, his impassibility.

Because Orthodox Christian theology doesn't for a minute, doesn't for a minute, submit that for God to be self-sufficient and self-contained and immutable and unchangeable and unconquerable, that that means that he has no feelings or emotions or no real deep engagement with people.

It doesn't mean that he's inert for God to be sovereign and unchangeable. It doesn't mean that he has no affection or passions. It just means that he's in control, sovereignly, of all his thoughts and his passions and his affections.

[20 : 36] And unlike us as creatures, God is not irrational and involuntary and out of control in his emotions. Listen to how J.I. Packer explains God's impassibility.

I think you'll find this helpful. It means not that God is impassive and unfeeling. That's a frequent misunderstanding. But it means that no created beings can inflict pain and suffering and distress on him at their own will.

Insofar as God enters into suffering and grief, which Scripture plus the fact of the cross show that he does, it's by his own deliberate decision. He's never his creature's hapless victim.

The Christian mainstream has construed impassibility as meaning not that God is a stranger to joy and delight, but rather that his joy is permanent, clouded by no involuntary pain.

See what he's saying? God's actions are never passive and involuntary, but rather they're active and they're deliberate. He goes on to say this, Impassibility is not impassivity, or unconcern, an impersonal detachment in the face of the creation.

[21 : 51] It's not insensitivity and indifference to the distress of a fallen world. It's not inability or unwillingness to empathize with human pain and grief, but simply that God's experiences do not come upon him as ours come upon us.

For his are foreknown and willed and chosen by himself, and are not involuntary surprises forced on him from outside apart from his own decision in the way that ours regularly are.

So you see, there's no contradiction whatsoever in saying that God is sovereign and immutable, unchangeable, self-sufficient.

That's his aseity. But that he's also deeply sensitive to the pain of this fallen world and that he feels and shares human pain and grief.

That's what the Bible tells us plainly. He does. It's not that God has no feelings, nor is he ever detached from the world of his creatures.

[22 : 54] It's just that he's not at the mercy of his creatures. His afflictions are not contingent upon us. They're not involuntary.

They're not forced on God. And in that way, God's passions and emotions and feelings differ very greatly from our own. In fact, that's what makes God's passionate affections towards his creatures so wonderful, isn't it?

Because they're wholly voluntary. He doesn't need to love us. He doesn't need to feel for us. He doesn't need to grieve with us, to have compassion towards us.

But he does. He chooses to. He purposes to. He wills himself to. He sovereignly wills that he shall be that kind of God to his people.

And so, yes, we affirm everything that Orthodox theology says of God. He is of himself. That's his aseity. He's self-contained.

[23 : 58] He's self-sufficient. And he is truly impassable. He's not subject to involuntary pain or suffering or defeat. He can't suffer any loss ultimately. Otherwise, he wouldn't be God, the sovereign.

But that doesn't for a minute mean that God has no emotions. The Bible tells us again and again and again of many such attributes that God has.

And that's exactly what we're reading here in Exodus chapter 3, verse 7. He's passionate. He's involved. He knows from the inside the real suffering of his people.

I know their sufferings. Now, you see, you may wonder why I emphasize that.

But I emphasize it for a number of reasons. One of them is this. You won't find that understanding of God, for example, in the God of Islam. A Muslim will very readily say to you that God is of

himself, self-contained.

[25 : 04] He is totally sovereign, unreachable, untouchable, all of these things. But I think you'd be rather scandalized to think that God knew in that way the pain of his people entered into their suffering, was near and emotional and passionate.

It's very, very different. But the God of the Bible is the sovereign creator of all. But he's the one who draws near and even knows the very inside of our hearts.

Aren't you glad about that? I certainly am because it means that I can talk to God, doesn't it, about my sufferings, about my experiences. It means that I can talk to him about things that maybe I can't talk to anybody else on this earth about.

and he sees and he hears and he knows deep within. I guess many of us have got confidence that we speak to.

I hope you have. Maybe just a few people. It might just be one person in life that you know that you can tell absolutely anything to. It's a great gift if you have a friend like that, isn't it?

[26 : 17] Or friends like that. Maybe that you don't. But you see, with this God you do. Even if you have no human being on earth that you could divulge the deepest secrets of your hearts to.

But you can because he sees and he hears and he knows. He's a passionate God. He's not cold and distant. He's near. That's what the psalmist means when he says the Lord is near to all those who call on him in truth.

He hears and he knows the cries of his people. That's wonderful in itself, isn't it? But there's more even than that in our passage, isn't there? He's not just a hearing ear, not just a knowing heart.

But you see, this God also has a mighty hand. He's a God who can act and does act in answer to his people's prayers. He's not just a hearing ear to listen, although that in itself can be a great thing, can't it?

just to have someone who's a listening ear. It's a wonderful thing that sometimes. Just to be able to articulate things to somebody can help us, can't it? But often we need more than that.

[27 : 28] We need real help. We need real action. And God says, I've seen, I've heard, I know, and verse 8, I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, out of Egypt and into a land flowing with milk and honey, out of the place of bondage and slavery and into the place of liberation and blessing.

Look down to verse 19, you'll see that that is no easy thing. The king of Egypt will not let them go, God says, unless compelled by a mighty hand. But God says, so I will stretch out my hand, which is a mighty hand.

A hand of delivering power. And in answer, in answer to his people's cries, this God has a mighty hand, more mighty than all the enemies of his people.

And he is determined to stretch it out for the deliverance of those who have called to him. And that's why Moses can do what God calls him to do in verse 10, you see, to play his part in God's plan.

Come, I'll send you to Pharaoh that you may bring out the children of Israel from Egypt. And if you read on in the book of Exodus, you'll see that every single thing that God promises to Moses here is fulfilled.

[28 : 51] You can trust the words of this God, you see. Because he's a God who's passionate for his people. He's a God who is mighty to save. And the wonderful truth, friends, is that for those of us who are Christian believers, this God is our God as well.

The God of Moses, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. But he's a God that we have come to know even more fully than Moses knew him there. Because you see, the Exodus story is just the beginning, isn't it, of God's deliverance?

Of course, it was real. It was vitally important. But it was only a stage in God's ultimate plan and purpose. A purpose not just for the physical descendants of Abraham as there, but yes, through them, ultimately for an Israel who would include those from every tribe and language and people just as God had promised to Abraham.

Jew and Gentile alike together, all one, bound together in the great deliverance that was wrought by the Lord Jesus Christ. Not just, not just a deliverance from the taskmasters of Egypt, but from the bondage of death itself, from the terrible taskmaster of sin.

See, this great deliverance that we read about in Exodus was just part of the larger story, the great story of God's plan of deliverance for the whole world. And in a sense, this deliverance also serves as a picture, doesn't it?

[30 : 15] An illustration. In fact, it's a prophecy pointing forward to and explaining the greater events that transpired when Jesus Christ walked this earth and came in the fullness of time.

A greater than Moses, the one who came to lead all of his people out of sin and bondage and liberate them into the blessings of life and peace and prosperity. And that's what happened when Jesus came, when God stretched out his mighty hand and struck down all his enemies, triumphing over them in the blood of his cross.

That's why Luke tells us, do you remember when Jesus is transfigured in glory on the top of the mountain? Do you remember when Moses and Elijah appear with him? And Luke tells us that they spoke together about his departure, literally his exodus, that he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Jesus and Moses speaking together about the exodus that this exodus pointed forward to and spoke of. And it was all because God saw the affliction of his people in their bondage to sin and death.

And he heard their cry for helplessness. And he knew very deeply in his own heart their sufferings. And he came down to deliver them.

[31 : 39] And he delivered them out of the hand of all of their foes, out of the jaws of death itself, into the glory and the liberty of the sons of God. Richard Dawkins despises the God of the Old Testament.

He hates the message of the New Testament as well, especially the message of the cross. But he does think he's making some small concession when he says that at least, quote, Jesus is a huge improvement over the cruel ogre of the Old Testament.

But he's wrong. So wrong on both of those things. Because Jesus himself said, Moses was writing about me. Because he knew me as his God.

Should we be surprised when we come to the New Testament and we read in John chapter 1 verse 14 that the eternal God came down and became flesh and dwelt with us, sharing our experience, knowing it deeply and wonderfully?

Should we be surprised when we read that Jesus Christ was deeply moved in spirit? That when he met Mary at the grave of his beloved friend Lazarus, he wept when he saw their sufferings, when he heard their crying?

[33 : 05] Should we be surprised that he stretched out his mighty hand and cried, Lazarus, come forth and called the dead to life? or when he said, I am the resurrection and the life.

Whoever believes in me though he dies yet shall he live. Or when he cried out again with deep passion near the end of his ministry, some of his very last public words. And when he said, I have come into the world as light so whoever believes in me will not remain in darkness.

And he cried out with passion. Do you be surprised at the passionate feeling and love and tenderness and grief and care of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Of course not. Because we've seen all about this God, this passionate, delivering Savior all the way through the pages of the Old Testament, haven't we?

Just as we've seen him here in Exodus chapter 3. He's not a cruel ogre. He's a loving deliverer. And he always was that kind of God with a seeing eye and a hearing ear and a knowing heart just as we see it here.

[34 : 23] So we read it all the way through the story of the Old Testament. And yet in Jesus we see it more deeply, more wonderfully. We see it as it truly is, don't we?

That's why the book of Hebrews tells us that in Jesus God draws nearer to us still, nearer even than he drew to Moses. Because now, the writer tells us, he has been made like us in every way so as to be forever a merciful high priest to us.

that means that when we come to Jesus Christ we don't have a high priest he says who is unable to sympathize with our weakness. But we have one who is tempted in every way just as we are yet without sin.

He knows our suffering. That means, friends, when you come to Jesus you come to the God who knows you from the inside.

He knows your sin. He knows your sufferings too. And yet, think about this, even though he knows every single thing about you.

[35 : 37] That's a thought, isn't it? I guess there's not one person in the world you would like to know every single thing about you. though he knows from the inside every single thing about you.

He has his ear open to your cries and he has his mighty hand stretched out to deliver you from every enemy if you call out to him. He's a personal God and he's a passionate God. And in Jesus Christ we just see it all more clearly and more wonderfully and ultimately. But he's the same God. And that's why I'm so glad that when unlike Professor Dawkins you actually look at the evidence there's no need to be deluded about this God at all. In fact, I think it's only sheer prejudice that could keep you from reality about who this God really is. My God, the God of the Bible is a passionate God. He sees, he hears, he knows and he has stretched out his hand to deliver. I'm so glad that that's the true God of the Old Testament and the New. [36 : 57] It means you can love him and trust him because he has first loved you. It means you can know that his ears are open and his heart is open and his hand is strong to deliver. Well, I hope you know him too. Let's pray. Gracious God, our Father, we do thank you that you are a passionate God who loves us and who loves to draw near to us to bless and to save. Don't let us do anything that would cause us to flee from your presence. We pray. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.