

Acknowledgment

My Father God is ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He does not change, but is the same yesterday and today and forever.
Nehemiah 9:17, Malachi 3:6 and Hebrews 13:8

Song: by Edith McNeil

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, His mercies never come to an end
They are new every morning, new every morning
Great is Thy faithfulness O Lord, great is Thy faithfulness.

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Hymn: by Thomas Chisholm

1. Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father, there is no shadow of turning with thee.
Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not; as thou hast been, thou forever wilt be.

*Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
all I have needed thy hand hath provided.
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!*

2. Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,
sun, moon, and stars in their courses above join with all nature in manifold witness
to thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.
3. Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide,
strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

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Confession

Gracious Father, I confess today that you are the same God whose property is to always have mercy. You do not change, yet your mercies are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness.

I delight to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord of all, unchanging and unchangeable, consistent and reliable, and that the time is coming when every knee will bow before Him and everyone will declare that He is Lord of all.

Sovereign Lord, on the basis of your invitation to come to you, I come into your presence, astonished but grateful that you welcome me as a friend, as your child, without condemnation, and that together we can enjoy each other's company, the Redeemer with the redeemed.

Amen.

Scripture Readings

- Leviticus 26 (a long reading providing background to our topic)
- Matthew 5:17-20 (John 14:15 and Romans 13:8)

Prayer for Suffering Christians: (Barnabas prayer for 22/1/2023)

Our Father in Heaven,

We ask You to comfort Christians in many countries who have lost homes and livelihoods, even loved ones in natural disasters. Strengthen our brothers and sisters in Pakistan, Nigeria and Chad who have fled their homes because of rising floodwaters.

We pray for the provision of food, water and medicine for those in the Horn of Africa experiencing famine conditions. Please help those still rebuilding their lives months after the cyclone in Madagascar and typhoon in the Philippines.

You are the God who restores. Just as You intervened to preserve Your people through famine in Egypt, we ask You to restore Your people again.

We ask in the Name of Your beloved Son Jesus Christ.

Amen.

(Psalm 80:1-3)

Hymn: (MHB 21) *by Thomas Oliver*

1. The God of Abraham praise, who reigns enthroned above;
Ancient of everlasting days, and God of love;
Jehovah, great I AM, by earth and heaven confessed:
I bow and bless the sacred Name for ever blessed.
2. The God of Abraham praise, at whose supreme command
from earth we rise, and seek the joys at his right hand;
we all on earth forsake its wisdom, fame and power;
and him our only portion make, our Shield and Tower.
3. The God who reigns on high, the great archangels sing,
and "Holy, holy, holy," cry, "Almighty King!"
Who was and is the same, and evermore shall be:
Jehovah, Father, great I AM, we worship thee."
4. The whole triumphant host give thanks to God on high;
"Hail, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" they ever cry;
hail, Abraham's God and mine; I join the heavenly lays;
all might and majesty are thine, and endless praise!

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Message God: The Same Yesterday, Today and Forever

“If you obey me” said the Lord God, “you will be rewarded. If you disobey you will be punished” (Leviticus 26). Is the God who spoke then the same God we worship today? If so, has he changed his mind or even more concernedly, his character?

You may have heard it said (maybe said it yourself) “I don’t like the God of the Old Testament. He’s too fierce, too angry, wrathful and violent. I’ll run with Jesus ‘good and kind’ and the God of the New Testament”.

Time and space, as well as my own limitations, prevent a full exposition of this issue, but let’s start with this statement in the NT: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever” and a parallel statement in the OT: “I the Lord do not change”. If we accept this revelation of the unchanging nature of the Lord God, from Genesis to Revelation, then we are faced with the apparently challenging task of aligning what we read in the OT about God’s character with what we read in the NT.

I will propose from the outset that the character and behaviour of the God of the OT is identical with his character and behaviour in the NT. And that the character and teaching of Jesus Christ as recorded in the four gospels, combined with the commentary of his life and work that makes up the remainder of the NT, align perfectly with the character of God in his dealings with the Jews and the various nations during the history of Israel.

Note too that the understanding Jesus had of his Father and of his own mission was based on the OT. Jesus’ statements about the Father’s love, tender care and readiness to forgive; his attitude toward the oppressed and those proud rulers; his patience with his disciples and willingness to expend himself for others, are all based on the character of God as revealed in the OT.

Let’s look at some examples of the constancy of God’s character between covenants.

In our Leviticus reading we read of God’s intentions with respect to Israel’s obedience or disobedience to his law, repeated often during Israel’s time (EG Jeremiah 9:13ff). Has his requirement regarding keeping the law changed under the new covenant? Perhaps surprisingly, some say yes, others no, but one thing is certain: Jesus stated clearly that a love of him would go hand in hand with obeying his commands (John 14:15), noting that, because of love, his yoke is easy and his burden is light. It is quite clear from the seven letters of Revelation especially, but elsewhere in the NT as well, that obedience to the Law, some would say the Law of Christ, is still of great importance, and that failure to do so incurs significant punishment (call it discipline if you prefer).

And what about the destruction of nations and peoples, most notably under Joshua, but at other times too, including the Flood? Importantly, God did not show partiality, for when the disobedience of the Jews, God’s chosen people, reached its peak, they likewise were punished – severely, and more than once. But read carefully and you will see the amazing patience shown by God, combined with innumerable warnings and exhortations and preaching, often for centuries, before judgment fell. Under the New Covenant we see the same, except that the severity of God’s judgment has fallen not on the guilty but instead on his own innocent Son, Jesus.

JESUS CHRIST – THE SAME

Maybe the relative simplicity, albeit extraordinary and unique nature, of God's action in Jesus Christ (consider: one person, three years' ministry, culminating in three days' death and resurrection) makes it easy to gloss over the seriousness and extent of sin in general, and our sin in particular, and the severity of the corresponding punishment inflicted on God's Son. And maybe because a relationship with Father God is simple to restore through confession and repentance, the holiness and righteousness of God, together with his wrath tempered by love and mercy, is easily trivialised, sometimes ignored. So too, obedience to God's law is likewise easily and sadly trivialised.

Another aspect of "sameness" is the extent of God's lovingkindness and tender mercy. This is often overlooked, but it is evident throughout the OT as it is in the NT. The Psalms are full of it. And the affectionate statement "I will be your God and you will be my people" is repeated over a dozen times in the OT. It is the same today under the NT.

Consider also the warning messages of impending disaster. They are interspersed with heart-rending appeals to "turn again" (EG 1 Kings 8:33) to the Lord. Even during the prophesied destruction of Jerusalem there is the appeal "ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls", which was sadly responded to with "We will not walk in it" (Jeremiah 6:16). Can we not see parallels today? The God of the second chance, as he is sometimes called, remains so.

Lastly, there is the claim that Jesus never acted like the God of the OT. "Jesus is so ready to forgive, never judging and just loving on people. Not like OT times" we sometimes hear. Apart from the fact that Jesus was present and in full agreement when God "acted like that", there is enough in the NT to indicate that Jesus will "act like that" again. Some of his parables have horrible pronouncements. His denouncement of hypocrites is terrible. And his judgments as revealed in Revelation should inculcate the fear of God.

So much more could be said about this. What we have looked at just scratches the surface. But in conclusion let us remind ourselves again that we live in a time of grace where those who call upon the name of the Lord are saved from the wrath of God and the judgments to come (just like OT times), and all because of the cross. Never treat the holiness of our God, the work of our Saviour nor your salvation lightly, but with thanksgiving take upon yourself the easy yoke of the Holy Spirit and the light burden of obedience to the Law of Christ.

With confidence, we can place our hope in the One who is changeless and who can be entrusted with our lives for good and for eternity. Then, just like in OT times, with joy we will draw water from the wells of salvation (Isaiah 12:3).

Hymn: (MHB 245) *by James Montgomery (also wrote "Angels from the realm of glory")*

1. Hail to the Lord's anointed; great David's greater Son!
Hail, in the time appointed, His reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression, to set the captive free,
To take away transgressions, and rule in equity.
2. He comes, with succour speedy, to those who suffer wrong:
To help the poor and needy, and bid the weak be strong:

JESUS CHRIST – THE SAME

To give them songs for sighing, their darkness turned to light,
Whose souls, condemned and dying, were precious in His sight.

3. He shall come down like showers upon the fruitful earth:
And love, joy, hope, like flowers, spring in His path to birth:
Before Him, on the mountains, shall peace the herald go;
And righteousness in fountains, from hill to valley flow.
4. Kings shall fall down before Him, and gold and incense bring;
All nations shall adore Him, His praise all people sing;
To Him shall prayer unceasing and daily vows ascend;
His kingdom still increasing, a kingdom without end.
5. O'er every foe victorious, He on His throne shall rest;
From age to age more glorious, all blessing and all-blest.
The tide of time shall never His covenant remove;
His name shall stand for ever **His changeless name of love.**

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Benediction

May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. *(1 Thessalonians 5:23-24)*

This service prepared for HopeNet SA by Warren Mack