



Our personal perceptions of “the character, perfections, and attributes of God” have subtle and yet powerful influences on how we live our lives.

Sinners in the Hands of the Unknown God

DANIEL K JUDD

Daniel K Judd (daniel_judd@byu.edu) is dean of BYU Religious Education.

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Many readers will recognize the title of this article as a merging of phrases from two well-known sermons in Christian history. The first five words of the title come from Reverend Jonathan Edwards's eighteenth-century sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."¹ The last three words form a phrase from the testimony of the Apostle Paul to the ancient Athenians wherein he spoke of "THE UNKNOWN GOD" (Acts 17:23).

My purpose in writing this article is to explain how different scriptural, doctrinal, and cultural characterizations of God can influence faith in God—positively and negatively. Specifically, I will include contrasts between Reverend Edwards's "angry God" and the Apostle Paul's "God of patience and consolation" (Romans 15:5). A major part of this article will also discuss the character of God described in the scriptures of the restored gospel, "a perfect,

just God, and a merciful God also” (Alma 42:15), who does “all things for the welfare and happiness of his people” (Helaman 12:2).

The Nature of God

Jonathan Edwards (1703–58), a colonial America pastor who became the president of what would later be known as Princeton University, penned and preached “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” on July 8, 1741. Edwards intended to awaken the parishoners of his Enfield, Connecticut, congregation to the reality of their depravity and need for redemption. The “Enfield Sermon,” as Reverend Edwards’s discourse is known in scholarly circles, includes the following description of Diety as “the God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.”²

While this statement provides graphic evidence of Edwards’s belief in God’s “fiery indignation” (Hebrews 10:27), a careful study of the corpus of his writings reveals a pastor and theologian who passionately believed that God’s justice was a manifestation of his love for his children. Reverend Edwards’s dramatic expressions of God’s anger were his way of inviting his parishoners to see their depravity and desperate need for the grace of Christ (the Lord’s words in Doctrine and Covenants 19:7 denote a similar strategy). The majority of Edwards’s sermons include forceful aguments against sin and and the doctrine of universal salvation. His ministry has been identified as a major influence in the First Great Awakening, a period of time that Latter-day Saint scholars have recognized as having helped prepare people’s hearts and minds for the Restoration of the gospel through the Prophet Joseph Smith.³

The Apostle Paul’s testimony before the Athenian elite is considered a landmark sermon and one of the most significant discourses of his ministry.⁴ In the *Acts of the Apostles*, we read that as Paul first entered Athens, “his spirit was *stirred* in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry” (Acts 17:16; emphasis added). From his writings, it appears that the idolatry that most concerned Paul wasn’t the worship of the carved idols that lined the streets and filled the temples of Athens but that “the Athenians and strangers . . . spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new

thing” (Acts 17:21). Paul’s greater concern appears to be the acceptance the Athenians, and those who were coming to the city to be educated, were giving the philosophical and religious traditions their idols represented. Paul specifically mentions encounters with “certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks” (Acts 17:18). Epicurean philosophers emphasized that “the supreme good is pleasure,”⁵ and the Stoics stressed the “ideal of being imperturbable”⁶ (always composed). One Latter-day Saint described how the philosophy of stoicism had influenced his understanding of the character of God: “I thought of [God] as a stoic gatekeeper. To me he was someone who claimed to love but never expressed his love, or at least not to me. There were plenty of people around me who claimed to feel his love for them. I felt like while others around me could earn his love, I was not good enough. . . . I wanted to believe in a God who is not constantly angry with the shortcomings of his children, . . . but I just couldn’t.”⁷ This young man’s “stoic” belief system would later be identified as being a part of his challenges with a mental disorder that psychologists have termed “scrupulosity,” a form of obsessive-compulsive behavior often manifest in religious practices. I will return to his story later.

When the Apostle Paul was taken before the leading “men of Athens” (Acts 17:22) to provide greater detail about what is described as “new doctrine” (Acts 17:19) concerning “Jesus, and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18), he stated, “Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you” (Acts 17:22–23). Some of the Athenians may have understood Paul’s words “too superstitious” as a commendation for their zealous worship. Others may have taken Paul’s counsel as a rebuke for being “overly scrupulous, even [irrational], in their religious observance.”⁸ What is clear is the fact that Paul, acting in his calling as an Apostle, was testifying of the divinity, necessity, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and of the Savior’s identity as “the unknown God.” The Joseph Smith Translation of these verses includes Paul’s invitation to the Athenians to “seek the Lord, if they [were] willing to find him” (JST, Acts 17:27, footnote).

Just as the testimonies of latter-day Apostles elicit varied responses in our day, Paul’s apostolic witness to the Athenians brought a mixed reaction. Some called him a “babbler” (Acts 17:18) and “mocked” (Acts 17:32) him. Others were willing to “hear [him] again” (Acts 17:32), perhaps indicating that

they were intrigued by what Paul was teaching. The scriptural account also includes the names of others who “clave unto him” (Acts 17:34), suggesting there were those who accepted Paul’s testimony and followed his direction.

Even though the inhabitants of ancient Athens were clearly different in many ways from those who lived in Jonathan Edwards’s colonial America, a common teaching for both groups of people was the belief that “God’s purpose in all that he does is to bring honor to himself.”⁹ The doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is that God’s motives, as described in the scriptures and teachings of the Restoration, are not focused on adding to his own glory, but his “work and . . . glory [is] to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39).

What Is the Character of God?

Katherine Patterson’s book *Bridge to Terabithia* includes a meaningful contrast between two different characterizations of God as the author describes a conversation between two adolescents growing up in rural Virginia. The first character, Jess, is a shy and insecure young man who is from a poor, fundamentalist Christian family. His friend Leslie is secure and confident but has little if any religious training. One of the chapters in *Bridge to Terabithia* describes an experience the friends share when Leslie attends the annual Church Easter service with Jess and his family. The following dialogue ensues between Leslie, Jess, and Jess’s younger sister May Belle as they return home from attending the Easter worship service. Leslie begins the conversation with her comments on the service they have just attended:

“Gee, I’m really glad I came.”

Jess turned to Leslie in unbelief.

“It was better than a movie.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, I’m not.” . . . “That whole Jesus thing is really interesting, isn’t it?”

“What d’you mean?”

“All those people wanting to kill him when he hadn’t done anything to hurt them.” She hesitated. “It’s really kind of a beautiful story—like Abraham Lincoln or Socrates—or Aslan.”

“It ain’t beautiful,” May Belle broke in. “It’s scary. Nailing holes right through somebody’s hand.”

“May Belle’s right,” Jess [responded]. “It’s because we’re all vile sinners God made Jesus die.”

“Do you think that’s true?”

He was shocked. “It’s in the Bible, Leslie.”

She looked at him as if she were going to argue, then seemed to change her mind. "It's crazy, isn't it?" She shook her head. "You have to believe it, but you hate it. I don't have to believe it, and I think it's beautiful." She shook her head again. "It's crazy."

May Belle had her eyes all squinted as though Leslie was some strange creature in a zoo. "You gotta believe the Bible, Leslie."

"Why?" It was a genuine question. Leslie wasn't being smarty.

"Cause if you don't believe the Bible, . . . God'll damn you to hell when you die."

"Where'd she ever hear a thing like that?" . . .

"That's right, ain't it, Jess?" May Belle's shrill voice demanded. "Don't God damn you to hell if you don't believe the Bible?"

Jess pushed his hair out of his face. "I reckon," he muttered.

"I don't believe it," Leslie said. "I don't even think you've read the Bible."

"I read most of it." . . . "About the only book we got around our place." He looked up at Leslie and half grinned.

She smiled. "OK," she said. "But I still don't think God goes around damning people to hell."

They smiled at each other trying to ignore May Belle's anxious little voice. "But Leslie," she insisted. "What if you die? What's going to happen to you if you die?"¹⁰

Peter Enns, a professor of biblical studies and the author of the thought-provoking book *The Sin of Certainty*, makes the following autobiographical comment concerning his experience with this instructive dialogue between Jess, Leslie, and May Belle, which led him to question his own understanding of the character of God: "Jess's God was my default God, but Leslie's God was the one I, deep down, wanted to believe in. My inner May Belle reacted quickly—an aggressive panicked voice scolded me for slipping off the rails. After all, I wasn't calling into question some side issue of faith, like whether God wants me to give up chocolate or coffee for Lent, but a central question—perhaps *the* central question—What is God like?"¹¹

Whether it is an explicit belief or a tacit understanding, each of us has, or is in the process of developing, a sense of who we believe God to be. Some understand God to be loving and forgiving, others focus more on a God of justice and judgment, and still others have lost faith in God altogether, being unable to reconcile their cognitive and spiritual dissonance.

Our personal perceptions of "the character, perfections, and attributes of God"¹² have subtle and yet powerful influences on how we live our lives. Professor Richard Rice has written, "Our understanding of God has enormous practical significance. . . . What we think of God and how we respond to him are closely related. An inaccurate view of God can have disastrous effects on personal religious experience. We could never love a hostile, tyrannical being. . . . And we could not respect a mild, indulgent figure who never

took us seriously. Our personal religious experience can be healthy only if we hold an adequate conception of God.”¹³

Not only can a distorted view of God have a disastrous influence on our personal religious life, as Professor Rice suggested, but belief in a caricature of God, which in essence is a false god, can be especially destructive in interpersonal relationships. Conversely, to understand our personal and family identities, it is vital to understand God as he really is.

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “It is necessary for us to have an understanding of God himself in the beginning. If we start right, it is easy to go right all the time; but if we start wrong, we may go wrong, and it will be a hard matter to get right. There are but a very few beings in the world who understand rightly the character of God. . . . If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves. . . . It is the first principle of the Gospel, to know for a certainty the character of God.”¹⁴

President Heber C. Kimball, a counselor in the First Presidency to Brigham Young, described several attributes of God: “I am perfectly satisfied that my Father and my God is a cheerful, pleasant, lively, good-natured Being. Why? Because I am cheerful, pleasant, lively, and good-natured when I have His Spirit. That is one reason why I know; and another is—the Lord said, through Joseph Smith, ‘I delight in a glad heart and a cheerful countenance.’ That arises from the perfection of His attributes; He is a jovial, lively person, and a beautiful man.”¹⁵ Kimball’s description echoes the words of the prophet Enoch, who described God as “merciful and kind forever” (Moses 7:30).

Heber C. Kimball’s words provide a dramatic contrast to the description offered by Professor Richard Dawkins: “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser.”¹⁶ Or, as A. A. Milne observed, “The Old Testament is responsible for more atheism, agnosticism, disbelief—call it what you will—than any book ever written: It has emptied more churches than all the counter-attractions of cinema, motor bicycle, and golf-course.”¹⁷

The disparity between the statements of Heber C. Kimball and Richard Dawkins represents the wide gulf that exists concerning the character and caricatures of God. Believing in the caricatures of God are why some among us have lost faith. Learning to truly know God is “life eternal” (John 17:3).

While it isn’t my intention to provide an exhaustive reconciliation of what appears to be the angry God of the Hebrew Bible with the loving Christ

found in the New Testament, the following discussion is intended to provide additional insights that will strengthen faith in our Father in Heaven, in his Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Church and the gospel that bear his name.

Deepening Our Relationships with God

Sigmund Freud argued God to be a dysfunctional illusion that is simply a “projection” of a “need” for a powerful father figure,¹⁸ but research evidence clearly demonstrates that the understanding we have of the existence of God, his character, and the nature of our relationship with him, is related to our mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Those with a “secure relationship with God” score higher on measures of mental health than individuals whose relationship with God is tenuous.¹⁹ The research literature on “attachment to God” also suggests that individuals with unreliable or unstable relationships with their parents are able to *compensate* for less-than-nurturing relationships with their parents by developing an intimate relationship with God.²⁰ Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught, “When we are perplexed and stressed, explanatory help is not always immediately forthcoming, but compensatory help will be. Thus our process of cognition gives way to our personal submission, as we experience those moments when we learn to ‘be still, and know that I am God’ (Ps. 46:10).”²¹

Only hours before his crucifixion, Jesus Christ offered what has come to be known as the “Intercessory Prayer” to his Father on behalf of his disciples and all others who would “believe on [him] through their word” (John 17:20). A variation of this idea is also found in the Savior’s words to Joseph Smith as recorded in section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants:

And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent. (John 17:3)

This is eternal lives—to know the only wise and true God, and Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent. I am he. Receive ye, therefore, my law. (Doctrine and Covenants 132:24)

Both texts underscore the importance of coming to know God, but the Lord’s words in the Doctrine and Covenants, “eternal lives” (please note the plural), remind us that coming to *know* God has temporal and eternal significance for us as individuals and for the *lives* of those we love. For me, “eternal lives” centers on the eternal implications of my relationship with my family.

Authoritarian or Authoritative, Permissive or Supportive?

Research literature demonstrates that there is a *correspondence* between our relationship with God and the kind of relationships we have with our earthly mothers and fathers.²² Put another way, parent-child interactions are influenced by how we perceive our Heavenly Father treats us. Thus it is vital to model positive, *authoritative*, and *supportive* parenting and reject parenting styles that are *authoritarian* or *permissive*.

The *authoritative* parent is loving, sets reasonable expectations, follows through with consequences, sets boundaries, and is also warm, kind, and open to negotiation. Their focus is on the development of the child. The *authoritarian* parent is coercive and hostile, shaming, demeaning, controlling, rigid, nonnegotiating, and focused on their own needs. The *permissive* parent is indulgent and often neglectful. They refrain from setting boundaries or having structure, expect little responsibility, and have few, if any, consequences for negative behavior.

The *supportive* parent, like the authoritative parent, focuses on the growth of the child. The supportive parent encourages a child to discover their own strengths, is forgiving and gracious, and allows the child to make mistakes without berating them when they do.²³

A recent study conducted by BYU professors of Church history and doctrine Justin Dyer and Michael Goodman and two of their students, Cassidy Ogletree and Sharlene Nauta, concludes, “If God is viewed as disfavoring the person, being neglectful of the person, or even as punishing the person, authoritarian parenting may further degrade the individual’s sense of self, leading to an increase in suicide risk.”²⁴ A growing number of studies reveal that “young people growing up in families characterized by *authoritarian and permissive behavior*, establish insecure emotional relationships, . . . which in turn, could be a risk factor for suicidal ideation.”²⁵

The relationships between authoritarianism, permissiveness, and suicide are becoming increasingly important for Latter-day Saints. The United States Center for Disease Control recently reported that suicide was the third leading cause of death in the United States in 2015 for children ages 10–14. Suicide rates have been noted to be especially high in the Intermountain West,²⁶ with Utah being reported to have the seventh highest suicide rate for teenagers in the nation.²⁷ While research studies also reveal that the suicide rate for young men who were active in the Church is significantly lower than for those young men who were not active or who were not members of the

Church,²⁸ any suicide, and the associated trauma, is sobering and deserving of our best preventative efforts. These data underscore the importance of understanding the true nature of God as being neither authoritarian nor permissive, thus helping us emulate him in our roles as parents and in other roles of leadership we are asked to assume.

President Ezra Taft Benson once taught, “Whenever the God of heaven reveals His gospel to mankind, Satan, the archenemy to Christ, introduces a counterfeit.”²⁹ Acting in an *authoritarian* manner in any capacity is a distortion of what it means to act in an *authoritative* manner. Conversely, being *permissive* is a distortion of being *supportive* in our relationships with others.

Authoritarian parents and authoritarian leaders of many religious traditions have used the caricature of an authoritarian god to justify their abusive beliefs and practices. In 1994 leaders of the Hutu tribe in Rwanda, Africa, some of whom were members of the clergy, cited the following biblical text from 1 Samuel 15 to justify the extermination of members of the Tutsi tribe: “Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass” (1 Samuel 15:3). One pastor compared the Tutsis to the ancient Amalekites and warned that like Saul, the Hutu people would also be rejected by God if they did not exterminate all of the Tutsis. He preached, “If you don’t exterminate the Tutsis, you’ll be rejected. If you don’t want to be rejected by God, then finish the job of killing the people God has rejected. No child, no wife, no old man should be left alive.”³⁰ It has been estimated that approximately eight hundred thousand Rwandan lives were taken in one of the largest genocides in recent history.³¹

The Rwandan genocide begs the question concerning the legitimacy of the biblical text and its wider application in our lives today—can we believe in a God who gives commands that contradict our own sense of right and wrong? What do we do when our own beliefs, or the beliefs of those we love, contradict the teachings of God found in scripture or in the words of his latter-day servants?

In the October 2009 general conference, Elder Dallin H. Oaks provided the following illustration: “If an adult child is living in cohabitation, does the seriousness of sexual relations outside the bonds of marriage require that this child feel the full weight of family disapproval by being excluded from any family contacts, or does parental love require that the fact of cohabitation be ignored? *I have seen both of these extremes, and I believe that both are*

inappropriate.³² Elder Oaks continued by wisely counseling that the details of how a parent should respond in such a situation “is a matter for parental wisdom, guided by the inspiration of the Lord.” It is important to note that Elder Oaks warned that both *excluding* the family member and *ignoring* their actions are “extremes” that are “inappropriate.”

Case Study

While more research has been done on authoritarian relationships, *permissive perspectives and practices* have also been reported to have negative outcomes with respect to faith, family, and mental health, including suicidal ideation.³³ The late Dr. Carlfred Broderick, a Latter-day Saint professor of marriage and family therapy at the University of Southern California, provided an interesting illustration of authoritarian parenting in his book *My Parents Married on a Dare*, from which I will illustrate the hazards of both authoritarian and permissive relationships.

Dr. Broderick’s illustration begins with his referring a Latter-day Saint family to a Jewish colleague for family therapy. After encountering resistance from the parents to his counsel to “lighten up a little” with their rebellious teenage daughter, the therapist sought Dr. Broderick’s counsel. “Every time I suggest any movement in the direction of loosening up,” the therapist observed, “they [the parents] patiently explain to me that I just don’t understand their religious obligation, as Mormon parents, to keep this kid in line. Frankly, I don’t know how to deal with this. I don’t want to attack their religious beliefs, but the situation is explosive.”³⁴ After some discussion, Dr. Broderick suggested a particular strategy wherein the therapist would express interest in the family’s religious beliefs, specifically what he termed “the war in heaven.” The therapist followed the suggestion and called sometime later in wonderment at how well Dr. Broderick’s counsel had worked. Dr. Broderick’s colleague indicated that even the rebellious teen had offered to share with him a copy of a book about their faith with a picture of their family in the front. The therapist was most surprised with the mother’s dramatic change. After describing how the mother had responded quickly at the opportunity of sharing her beliefs about the war in heaven, her enthusiasm came to an end as quickly as it had started.

Dr. Broderick’s colleague described what happened as follows: “In seconds she [the mother] had launched into some story about a council in heaven and two plans and she gets about three minutes into it and she stops cold in

her tracks and gives me a funny look and says, 'All right, Doctor, you've made your point.' From that moment on they were like putty in my hands. It was like magic. Carl, what is this war in heaven?"³⁵ The mother had obviously come to the realization that what she was doing in the name of her religion to influence her daughter's behavior was similar to the strategy designed by the adversary to enslave humankind. With some similarity to how Satan was attempting to "destroy the agency of man" (Moses 4:3), she, too, was attempting to destroy the agency of her daughter by forcing her to follow her mother's expectations.

While many, if not most, Latter-day Saints understand Satan's plan was to selfishly "force" the children of God to do right, Robert J. Matthews, former dean of Religious Education at BYU, described Lucifer's plan differently. Dean Matthews observed the following:

It seems strange to me that a third of all the spirits that had the potential to be born into this world would have favored a plan based on forced obedience. Most of us do not like to be forced. As I see it, the real issue was not so much one of force as it was that Lucifer said he would guarantee salvation for his spirit brothers and sisters. He promised salvation without excellence, without effort, without hard work, without individual responsibility. That is the lie he promulgated in the preearth councils. That so-called shortcut to salvation captivated many gullible and lazy spirits. They wanted something for nothing.³⁶

There are many on the earth who have lost their agency by indulging themselves, and by being indulged, in unworthy practices. I believe that Lucifer's plan to "destroy the agency of man" (Moses 4:3) was more permissive than it was authoritarian. His plan was similar to Nehor's argument that "all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life" (Alma 1:4).

Whether Lucifer's plan was one of authoritarian power, permissive indulgence, or both, the scriptures plainly teach that the adversary was and is "a liar from the beginning" (Doctrine and Covenants 93:25) and that he "will not support his children at the last day, but doth speedily drag them down to hell" (Alma 30:60) by any means possible.

Advocacy and Mentoring

It is often in relationships with other mortals that we experience God's love and deepen our understanding of his character, perfections, and attributes. The prophet Lehi acknowledged that his son Jacob had "suffered afflictions and much sorrow, because of the rudeness of [his] brethren" but also promised him, "Thou shalt dwell safely with thy brother, Nephi" (2 Nephi 2:1, 3).

While I value the theoretical and clinical training I received in graduate school and I'm grateful for the experiences I had with fellow students, faculty, staff, and others, the experience I treasure the most occurred during the very last hour of my formal graduate school experience. In my particular discipline, doctoral students were required to conduct original research, formally write up their study, and then defend their work before an examination committee. The results of this exam determined whether the candidate would pass or fail.

The first fifteen minutes of the two-hour examination went quite smoothly. The questions were straightforward, and I felt I answered them well. I began to feel the confidence that comes with completing a long-term goal. The next set of questions, however, was more difficult as we began to discuss some of the more controversial details of my work concerning the place of moral agency in psychotherapy. Even though I was feeling confident in how the defense was proceeding and realized that I would need to make some revisions to what I had written, I wasn't prepared for what happened next. The chair of the examination committee suddenly voiced his feelings that he wasn't happy with the overall scope of my study and didn't know if he could give me a passing vote. After several more attempts to defend my work, I realized that I didn't have the ability to adequately respond to his objections—and what he was saying appeared to be influencing the other members of the examination committee. I began to lose hope.

At that critical moment, Professor Richard Nephi Williams, a member of my doctoral committee, asked the examination committee if he could make a few comments. For the next twenty minutes Professor Williams defended my work, and he defended me. The attitude in the room changed dramatically. Differences were reconciled, a vote was taken, and I passed the examination and graduated with a degree that has blessed my life in ways I couldn't have anticipated.

I hope everyone at some point in their lives has someone stand up for them, plead their cause, and save them as Professor Williams saved me. This experience helped me understand in a very personal way what is meant in

scripture when Jesus Christ is referred to as our “advocate with the Father” (Doctrine and Covenants 110:4; JST, 1 John 2:1).

There are, however, at least two major doctrinal differences in the ways Professor Williams blessed my life and how the Savior is my advocate. Both of these doctrinal points help us to better understand the character of God and the kind of men and women he would have us be. One of these points is emphasized by section 45 of the Doctrine and Covenants: “Listen to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him—saying: Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified; wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren *that believe on my name*, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life” (Doctrine and Covenants 45:3–5; emphasis added). Professor Williams defended me based on the strength of my work and his faith in *me*; the Savior’s advocacy at my judgment is based on the efficacy of his atoning sacrifice and my faith in *him*. Our happiness in this life and salvation in the next is more about him than it is about us.

The young man I mentioned earlier who was struggling with scrupulosity wrote the following description of how he began to understand the significance and meaning of the grace of Christ: “My first experience understanding grace came during the beginning months of my mission when confessing to my mission president. He taught me that ‘grace, by definition, is undeserved.’ I never before thought that I could gain [or even ask] something from God that I did not deserve.”³⁷

The prophet Lehi was teaching his son Jacob a similar lesson when he recorded, “I know that thou art redeemed, because of the *righteousness of thy Redeemer*” (2 Nephi 2:3; emphasis added). Both Jacob’s redemption and the young missionary’s healing were less about their own good works, and more about the redemptive and strengthening blessings of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Human Depravity and the God of Love

Another important doctrinal difference between Professor Williams being my advocate and the Savior “pleading my cause before . . . [the Father]” has to do with the character and intentions of God. While I can’t be certain of the motives of the members of my examination committee, I know that my Father in Heaven does not see me, in the words of Charles Spurgeon, as “a

lump of unworthiness, a mass of corruption, and a heap of sin” unworthy of his love and forgiveness.³⁸ Reverend Spurgeon’s description of “sinful man” is a reflection of the belief many have in the doctrine of original sin, which includes the idea that, “all humans alive at any given time (with the exception of . . . Jesus Christ) are included in a ‘mass of perdition’ and are altogether guilty and damned by God on account of Adam’s primal sin.”³⁹ Terryl Givens stated, “Repudiation of original sin is perhaps the earliest major divergence from creedal Christian doctrine . . . that Mormonism unambiguously asserts.”⁴⁰ Prophets, both ancient and modern, have taught that while humankind is “fallen” (Alma 22:12) and that we can *become* an “enemy to God” (Mosiah 3:19), each child is “innocent before God” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:38) at the time he or she is born. As Latter-day Saints we reject the doctrines of human depravity and the characterization of a god who is tyrannical, retributive, and in need of being appeased.

Roberta Bondi, professor emerita of church history at Candler School of Theology, has written the following account of her experience attending religious revivals each summer as a child, a remembrance that provides a sobering description of the consequences of believing in human depravity: “The goal of the revival was to create or revive in everybody the three-fold conviction that each of us was so rotten to the core that we deserved to die and roast in hell forever; that God was enraged at us enough to kill us; and finally, that in spite of everything, God loved us enough to rescue us by sending his son as a sacrifice to die in our place.”⁴¹

Professor Bondi continued her description by explaining that even though she was invited to believe in Christ as a child, she had also learned to fear God in a way that evoked feelings of shame and self-loathing that, in her words, “consumes you with anger, that renders you passive, that swallows you in depression, that keeps you from loving and being loved.”⁴² Contrast Professor Bondi’s story with the following account from Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles:

I make my own heartfelt declaration of God our Eternal Father . . . because some in the contemporary world suffer from a distressing misconception of Him. Among these there is a tendency to feel distant from the Father, even estranged from Him, if they believe in Him at all. And if they do believe, many moderns say they might feel comfortable in the arms of Jesus, but they are uneasy contemplating the stern encounter of God. . . . I bear personal witness this day of a personal, living God, who knows our names, hears and answers prayers, and cherishes us eternally as children of His spirit. I testify that amidst the wondrously complex tasks inherent in the universe, He seeks our individual happiness and safety above all other godly concerns.

We are created in His very image and likeness, and Jesus of Nazareth, His Only Begotten Son in the flesh, came to earth as the perfect mortal manifestation of His grandeur.⁴³

Conclusion

Jonathan Edwards spoke at length of a god who inspired the doctrine of original sin. The Apostle Paul came to understand that “the unknown God” acknowledged by the Athenians was Jesus Christ, but only after spending much of his life worshipping the right God in the wrong way. One of the major conclusions I am able to make from a lifetime of studying the relationships between religious belief, practice, and mental health is that many of the personal and interpersonal problems with which people of faith wrestle, including members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, are found in a misunderstanding of the character of God and the extremes of religious belief and practice these misperceptions often support. C. S. Lewis once said, “He [the devil] always sends errors into the world in pairs—pairs of opposites. And he always encourages us to spend a lot of time thinking which is the worse. You see why, of course? He relies on your extra dislike of the one error to draw you gradually into the opposite one.”⁴⁴

The God re-revealed to humankind through the Prophet Joseph Smith is authoritative and just, but not authoritarian, nor vengeful. He is supportive and merciful, but not permissive or indulgent. If he was to change from merciful to indulgent or from just to vengeful, or some combination of both counterfeits, he would, in Alma’s words, “cease to be God” (Alma 42:25).

A dear friend recently shared a story of a time in her life when she experienced so much adversity that, in her words, she “was stretched repeatedly nearly to the breaking point.” It was during these dark days that she was asked by a friend, “How can you trust a God who would let all of these hard things happen to you?” Her answer is profound:

I didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t that I had never been angry with God or struggled to understand what was going on in my life, but I did trust him. I had just never had to explain why in words. So I telegraphed a silent prayer and opened my mouth. The words I heard myself say have been a blessing to me ever since. “No, you don’t understand,” I said. “That’s WHY I trust him! What good would a god be who would just hand me back my own categories about myself and settle for what I think I can be? My God knows who I can be and, even when it’s going to hurt like the devil to get there, he doesn’t flinch. . . . He is not drawn off by my pain or my anger or my tears. That is why I trust him.”⁴⁵

The prophet Mormon taught, “He changeth not; if so he would cease to be God” (Mormon 9:19). In the following quotation, C. S. Lewis describes the complimentary nature of God’s attributes of justice and mercy: “The Humanitarian theory wants simply to abolish justice and substitute mercy for it. Mercy, detached from justice, grows unmerciful. That is the important paradox. As there are plants which will flourish only in mountain soil, so it appears that mercy will flower only when it grows in the crannies of the rock of justice: transplanted to the marshlands of mere Humanitarianism, it becomes a man-eating weed, all the more dangerous because it is still called by the same name as the mountain variety.”⁴⁶

Understanding that “God’s anger and His wrath are not a *contradiction* of His love but an *evidence* of [it]”⁴⁷ helps us understand some of the more difficult passages in scripture that describe what appears to be a god of vengeance. C. S. Lewis wrote the following in a letter to an individual who had asked about Lewis’s views on the inerrancy of scripture and the vengeance of God: “The ultimate question [Lewis wrote] is whether the doctrine of the goodness of God or that of the inerrancy of scripture is to prevail when they conflict. I think the doctrine of the goodness of God is the more certain of the two. Indeed, only that doctrine renders this worship of him obligatory or even permissible.”⁴⁸

Elder Holland has observed that some of the harsh descriptions of God found in the Bible come “through a misreading (and surely, in some cases, a mistranslation) of the [text].” Elder Holland has also suggested that “one of the remarkable contributions of the Book of Mormon is its seamless, perfectly consistent view of divinity” where there is “no misreading of the God who is urgently, lovingly, faithfully at work on every page of that record . . . to give the world back its Bible and a correct view of Deity with it.”⁴⁹ The young man I quoted earlier, who expressed difficulty feeling the love of God, shared the following as being one of the most important things he did to help him work through his personal challenges understanding the true nature of God and overcoming his obsessive-compulsive religious beliefs and practices:

I started to study the Book of Mormon with the intent to understand God’s love and to truly believe that he loved me. I also began to pray as a way to develop a relationship with God and as a way to [seek] for healing from heaven. Over [time] I was able to gain an understanding that God was not, as I once heard him described, “the big mean kid in the sky with a magnifying glass,” but that he was truly a loving God. [My]study [of the Book of Mormon] had an enormous benefit on my mental health and my understanding of God’s loving personality.⁵⁰

The gospel of Jesus Christ as restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith, and the Savior's servants who have followed, allows us to have hope that even though we do not "know the meaning of all things," we can "know that [God] loveth his children" (1 Nephi 11:117) and that he does "all things for the welfare and happiness of his people" (Helaman 12:2). A correct understanding of the character of God is one of the "plain and most precious" (1 Nephi 13:26) truths we can come to know as we strive to love and serve God and our neighbors.

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