

Discounting and Dismissing God

Numbers 21:4-5 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵ The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food."

John 3:16-21 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Discounting and Dismissing God

One of the most significant stories in the Bible is the story of the slavery of the Hebrew clans, their rescue from slavery in Egypt, and their relationship with God as they made their way to a new homeland. If you ever saw the old movie, *The Ten Commandments*, then that probably is your mental picture of this epic story about the relationship between the Hebrew people and God. But, because of time limitations, the movie couldn't show just **how** rocky that relationship was. Not long after being rescued from slavery, not long after Pharaoh's great army had been about to overtake them and they had been saved by God, not long after they had experienced God's great love for them, they discounted all of that - and began to complain.

Exodus 15:23-24 When they came to Marah . . . the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" Did they trust that God wouldn't forget about their needs? No, they griped and complained. Nonetheless, God provided good, sweet water.

Exodus 16:2-3 "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." After all that God had already done for them, did they expect God to forget about their needs? Yet, despite their lack of trust and their complaining, God gave them manna to eat. All they had to do was go out and pick it up. It was easy pickings. It was there every morning.

Exodus 17:3 "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

Numbers 11:4-6 "If only we had meat to eat! ⁵ We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; ⁶ but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." Now wait a minute, the manna is free, requires little effort, shows up every day, and there's always plenty. My grandfather would say that they're looking a gift horse in the mouth. Despite their ingratitude, God also provides quail to eat.

God has brought them out of slavery, provided manna to eat every morning, quail to eat in the evening, and water to drink in the middle of a wasteland. Guided and fed, the Hebrew clans approached the promised homeland. They sent spies ahead to check things out. Ten of the twelve spies returned and reported that the land was full of giants who would demolish them. The other two spies reported that it was a bountiful land and that God would be with them when they went there. So, did the Hebrews put their trust in the God who had protected and cared for them so far?

Numbers 14:2-3 ² And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole

congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! ³ Why is the LORD bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? . . . would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" They dismissed the love that God had shown them. They discounted the protection they had received. They dismissed their history and their relationship with God.

Again in chapter sixteen and chapter twenty, the people complain and wish for the good old days back in Egypt. Today's Old Testament text from chapter 21 is the final complaint of the Hebrews. They've been complaining for so long that it has almost become automatic. It doesn't even have to make any sense. They say, "There is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." They detest the miserable food that they claim they don't have? In today's text it seems like there is no recollection of being saved from slavery in Egypt, no memory of the covenant entered into with God at Mount Sinai, and they have forgotten that they have been promised that they will be a holy nation, a kingdom of priests, a light to all nations.

The people have been fickle. God has been faithful. The Hebrews have forgotten all the care that they've received, yet God hasn't forgotten them. The people put no trust in God, who has always been trustworthy. The people have a warped and twisted sense of history. They can't seem to remember all of God's acts of love for them, nor can they remember the suffering of slavery. They dream of the "good old days." If we had been God, we would have given up long ago. We would have walked away and left them to stew in their own juice. They would have died in the wilderness and deservedly so. But we all know how this epic story ends. The Hebrew clans make it to their new homeland and settle in it.

Fast forward now through twelve centuries or so to the time of the writing of John's gospel. The reading today from that gospel includes one of the most familiar verses in the Bible. It is also one of the most misunderstood and most misused fragments of scripture. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." The way that these twenty-seven words get used by some would leave you with the impression that what it really said was, "God so loved the church that he sent his son so that I would believe in Jesus and go to heaven and you wouldn't believe the right things and go rot in hell." That may be an exaggeration, but it can certainly sound like the person who throws this scripture around is hitting you over the head with it.

God so loved the world – not just a few people, not just those who love him, not even just human beings – the world. The word in the original Greek text is *kosmos* and that is just what it means, the whole world, all of creation, the good, the bad, and the ugly among us – the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, the mountains and the valleys, the rain forests and the deserts, the air above and the sea below. God has declared it good, very good.

John 3:16 has been quoted alone so much that we forget its context. The next verse explains God's motive. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." John makes it abundantly clear that God cares so much for the whole world that God came in human form. We saw how patient and steadfast God's love was for those ancient Hebrews. And all through Scripture we see God's extravagant love for the world. God's love is a self-giving act of grace. Jesus taught that love isn't just for those who look and think and believe like us, but also for our enemies and those who persecute us. The first century church opened its doors not only to Jews, but also Gentiles, not only to those who seemed worthy, but also to those who did not. Through the centuries, divine compassion for the oppressed and divine passion for justice have inspired prophets and preachers to declare that God's love is all-inclusive, regardless of age, race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, or creed.

In the gospel of John the word, *believe*, is always an action verb. It's something you do. It shouldn't be reduced to just giving assent to some particular statement. In John the opposite of belief isn't unbelief, but disobedience. To believe, therefore, is to obey. To believe is to have trust, trust

that guides your actions. Our spiritual ancestors, those ancient wandering Hebrews, didn't believe, that is, they didn't trust. So they didn't want to obey, to move forward in a trusting relationship with God to a new life in a new homeland. They kept wanting to go back to Egypt, back to the way things were.

We shouldn't think of eternal life in terms of quantity - but rather in terms of quality of life. It's not just a non-ending human existence, but life lived in relationship with - and in the presence of - God. To have eternal life is to live life that is no longer defined by flesh and blood and by human will alone. Eternal life is life that is lived in harmony with God. It doesn't mean just human existence, but it is a way of describing life lived in the never ending presence of God. Eternal life is not something put off until the believer's future. It begins in the believers' here and now. John's gospel speaks of eternal life and judgment in the present tense and so, decisions are a moment of judgment as we choose to live in love and harmony or, to live in selfishness and strife.

Our spiritual ancestors wandered in the wilderness between Egypt and Palestine. They also wandered in the wilderness of anxiety and fear because they failed to remember, they failed to trust, they kept making decisions that condemned them to uncertainty and fear. But there were moments when they accepted the covenant, the relationship of eternal love that God offered them. Like them, we make decisions all the time that can save us by placing our trust in eternal goodness and love found by living the way of life that Jesus lived as an example for us. Or, our decisions can be judgments that condemn us to wandering in meaninglessness, anxiety, fear and despair.

God loves us, and all of the world so much that he came and lived among us, so that everyone who trusts him won't perish in meaningless wandering or self-destructive behavior, but will live a life by eternal values, in relationship with the one who is eternal love. God didn't come to condemn, but to show the path of life that saves. Amen.

Numbers 16:13-14 Is it too little that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness, that you must also lord it over us? ¹⁴ It is clear you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards.

Numbers 20:3-5 The people quarreled with Moses and said, "Would that we had died when our kindred died before the LORD! ⁴ Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here? ⁵ Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to bring us to this wretched place? It is no place for grain, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates; and there is no water to drink."

Sisters and Brothers,
Take back your life.

Reclaim control of who you are and how you act.
Fill your life with purpose, with meaning, with love.
Don't run with the pack, but show the herd a better path.