

SfS Desmond Ford

THE JOYOUS TRUTH ABOUT HELL — 2

Desmond Ford

**When we puzzle over heaven and hell,
we must answer the question:
“Does God have two faces?”**

**Is there one face of heavenly love and
forgiveness, and another of hellish sadism?
An extended excerpt from C.S. Lewis’
The Pilgrim’s Regress helps pose the
problem of the goodness of God
and everlasting torment.**

The crucial question we must answer from Scripture is: “Does God have two faces?”

Is there one face, the lips of which say, “Love your enemies. Bless them that curse you.”?

He [our Father in heaven] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:45 NIV)

I tell you, [forgive] not seven times, but seventy-seven times. (Matthew 18:22)

A second face

And is there another face—that of a sadistic monster—that maintains an everlasting Auschwitz that has no humanly-discernible purpose?

That everlasting charnel house will stain and blot his universe forever and ever and ever. A mother will be able to look across the chasm between heaven and hell, and see her child in excruciating pain, calling out for relief. At the same time she will be singing hymns to the “merciful” Almighty who, from the beginning of time, decreed that he would create millions of human beings, and consign most of them to eternal torment!

C.S. Lewis and two faces

Has God two faces? Or can the Scriptures help us decide between them?

The metaphor reminds me of what C. S. Lewis wrote in his book, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. (Next to *Until We Have Faces*, perhaps his best.) Here is the protagonist’s experience when he first encounters a hypocritical minister. The minister puts on a good face one moment and then reveals his natural face:

And when John came into the room, there was an old man with a red, round face, who was very kind and full of jokes, so that John quite got over his fears, and they had a good talk about fishing tackle and bicycles.

But just when the talk was at its best, the Steward got up and cleared his throat. He then took down a mask from the wall with a long white beard attached to it and suddenly clapped it on his face, so that his appearance

was awful.

And he said, “Now I am going to tell you about the Landlord. The Landlord owns all the country and it is very, very kind of him to allow us to live on it at all—very, very kind.” He went on repeating, “very kind” in a queer singsong voice so long that John would have laughed, but that now he was beginning to be frightened again.

The steward then took down from a peg, a big card with small print all over it, and said, “Here is a list of the things the Landlord says you must not do. You’d better look at it.”

So John took the card: but half the rules seemed to forbid things he had never heard of; and the other half forbade things he was doing every day and could not imagine not doing; and the number of the rules was so enormous that he felt he could never remember them all.

“I hope,” said the Steward, “that you have not already broken any of the rules.”

John’s heart began to thump, his eyes bulged more and more; and he was at his wit’s end when the Steward took the mask off and looked at John with his real face and said, “Better tell a lie, old chap, better tell a lie. Easiest for all concerned,” and popped the mask back on his face all in a flash.

John gulped and said quickly, “Oh, no, sir.”

“That is just as well,” said the Steward through the mask. “Because you know if you did break any of them and the Landlord got to know of it, do you know what he’d do to you?”

“No, sir,” said John: and the Steward’s eyes seemed to be twinkling dreadfully through the holes of the mask. “He’d take you and shut you up forever and ever in a black hole full of snakes and scorpions as large as lobsters—for ever and ever. And, besides that, he is such a kind, good man, so very, very kind. I’m sure you would never want to displease him.”

“No, sir,” said John. “But, please sir. . . .”

“Well,” said the Steward.

“Please, sir, supposing I did break one, one little one, just by accident, you know. Could nothing stop the snakes and the lobsters?”

“Ah! . . .” said the steward; and then he sat down and talked for a long time, but John could not understand a single syllable.

However, it all ended with pointing out that the Landlord was quite extraordinarily kind and good to his tenants, and would certainly torture most of them to death the moment he had the slightest pretext.

[C.S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim’s Regress: An allegorical apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co: 1933, 1948, 1981), pages 4-5]

THE JOYOUS TRUTH ABOUT HELL — 3

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The traditional doctrine of an ever-burning hell conjures up a two-faced god. All Scripture portrays very clearly a one-faced God. That Face is turned toward us in Christ, and is good, kind, compassionate, and merciful.

Does God have two faces?

One face of God is very, very clear.

God is the Host of banquets, feasts, and parties, and whosoever will may come (Revelation 22:17, see also Mark 8:34).

The blind, the deaf, the paralyzed, the lepers, the outcasts, and the jailbirds come—and they are not turned away. It's very clear that one of God's faces is to welcome those whom no one else would welcome.

God loves the unlovely, and forgives the unforgivable.

Good Father and Shepherd

God is the Father of the prodigal son, and the Father of the prodigal son's brother.

God can say to the pouting brother, "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours" (Luke 15:31 CEV).

God is the Good Shepherd who goes looking for the one lost sheep. (See Luke 15:3-7.)

These good things about God are clear.

God so loves

Yes, one face of God is very clear.

All doubt beyond, All fear above,
Nor cursing creed nor crackling pile
can burn or blot it—God is love.

In the best-known text of Scripture—in chapter one thousand—we have the truth on this topic summed up:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16 NKJV)

What does "perish" mean? The Greek word "perish" means "to be no more." It is God's desire that we shall not perish but have everlasting life.

God is like Jesus

What is God like? He is like Jesus.

Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."

Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father?'" (John 14:8-9, NIV)

What is God the Father like? He is like the Christ who made a long journey to help a mother who was anxious over her sick

daughter. The Father is like the Christ who took up children into his arms to bless them. Like the One who defended the woman taken in adultery. Like the One who after his resurrection remembered how depressed Peter was because of his failure and sent a special angelic message: "Go, and tell my disciples and Peter" (Mark 16:7).

Gentleness of Christ

Think of the gentleness of Christ. I love his words:

"The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

(Matthew 26:41; Mark 14:38 NKJV)

What wonderfully compassionate words! While he is suffering so intensely in Gethsemane he makes excuses for his disciples. He knew that they wanted to do what was right, it was just difficult.

The religion of Jesus

I remember how impressed I was, decades ago, when I first read in Matthew 23 his condemnations of bad religion.

He said about the Pharisees,

"For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers." (Matthew 23:4 NKJV)

It hit me like a lightning bolt. "The religion of Jesus must be the opposite of what he is condemning! It's not a religion of heavy burdens, but one of joy and gladness and assurance and confidence!"

No heavy burdens in Jesus' religion

The religion of Jesus is to be aware that God is for us and not against us, even when we are at our weakest, or even at our worst.

Religious leaders may "bind heavy burdens" but Jesus doesn't. Jesus says:

"Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30 KJV)

Compassionate Old Testament God

We see this same God in the Old Testament, too.

Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed,
Because His compassions fail not.

They are new every morning;

Great is Your faithfulness.

(Lamentations 3:22-23 NKJV)

He doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men. (v. 33)

"I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee." (Jeremiah 31:3 KJV)

"Why will ye die?" (Jeremiah 27:13; Ezekiel 18:31; 33:11)

"How can I give you up?" (Hosea 11:8 NIV)

"For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed," says the Lord, who has compassion on you. (Isaiah 54:10 NRSV)

"See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me." (Isaiah 49:16 NIV)

In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. (Isaiah 63:9)

What a picture of God! The wounded God who became sin for our sakes, and died for us.

Tender Old Testament laws

You remember some of the many laws of the Old Testament. They even concern such tender things as birds and their nests.

There are laws of compassion in the Old Testament law: Be careful how you treat the widow. Be careful how you treat the orphan.

If you find an ox or ass of your enemy in a pit, kneel down and lift it out of the pit. If you find an animal in trouble with its heavy burden, you are to surely help that animal, even though you know it belongs to your enemy.

God is love from page one

The one clear, loving, face of God is everywhere written in Scripture, from the very first page:

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. (Genesis 1:31 NIV)

And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. (Genesis 2:9)

Right from the beginning, even when man sinned, God came walking in the garden in the cool of the day (see Genesis 3:8).

God does not come on the wings of the wind in haste to slay. He does not come in the heat of the day, when the intensity of the sun will add to our discomfort.

But God comes in the evening when the stars have come out to give hope in the darkness. Then God comes, and in all gentleness he tells Adam and Eve of the One who will be born to a woman. This One will destroy the wicked serpent (the devil) who has tempted them and led them into great loss.

God loving with sulking Jonah

God is the one who came to Jonah when Jonah was sitting in the shade of a vine, sulking. Jonah was pouting because he had lost his reputation as a great prophet-evangelist.

Jonah's prophecy about the destruction of the city of Nineveh (Jonah 3:4) had not been fulfilled. This caused him to sulk.

The dear Lord asks Jonah:

"Have you any right to be angry?" (Jonah 4:4)

"I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die." (Jonah 4:9)

But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (Jonah 4:10-11)

God loving with discouraged Elijah

Scripture tells of the God who meets Elijah when Elijah is running away from him.


God sends Elijah a lunch and says, "If you're going to run away from Me, you'll need some nourishment. Here you are." (See 1 Kings 19.)

God's face toward us

And Scripture tells of a God who could put up with a skittish Israel for forty years.

A Christ who could endure disciples who were always doubting, always trembling, always misunderstanding.

A Christ who could endure on a cross when the slightest twitch of an eyelid could have freed him. What a Christ! What a God!

That Face of goodness, kindness, mercy, and compassion is turned toward us in Christ, and is very, very clear. 

LED BY THE SPIRIT

by Desmond Ford

*"Because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God."
(Romans 8:14)*

RUSHED AND LED

The Bible has two words translated "led." One is a tumultuous word: "like a great mass of water rushing onward." That is

the word Peter used when he said that the prophets were motivated, or led, by the Spirit to utter their prophecies.

"Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

But the word Paul uses in Romans 8:14 is a word that means "gentle leading." This is the gentle leading of a shepherd for his sheep. This is the leading of a mother with her little child. This is the leading of a guide for a traveler. This is the leading of a teacher for a student. This is the leader of a captain for his unit. This is a gentle going ahead.