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# GOD SPEAKS TO HIS PEOPLE

### **Promises and Warnings**

Hopefully by now we are developing some real sense of the heart of this God who has chosen to reveal Himself — to make Himself known — to the world that He made. From the very earliest of times and then into the Bronze and Iron Ages, God progressively disclosed His nature. Readers may feel that they now have some clarity as to this nature but, at the risk of labouring the point, more should be said. One early objection needs to be cleared away: some people may accuse the author of focusing attention on the ‘nice’ bits of the Bible, whilst ignoring the ‘nasty’ bits. This objection can be repudiated relatively straightforwardly: the nature of God revealed so far in our studies is His nature as it has always been and always will be. Whilst ‘love’ is a key facet of His self disclosure, there are other facets of equal importance; His holiness and righteousness are two<sup>1</sup>. In this book we choose to focus on those attributes of God’s nature that show His recognizable beauty, because these

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<sup>1</sup> In chapter 2 we looked at the key ‘communicable attributes’ of God. A purist might observe that love, along with holiness, righteousness, wisdom, truthfulness etc are not facets, or expressions of God. These things run rather deeper than that! God is not loving, therefore: God *is* love. However for the point we are making in this chapter, we are merely noting that the attributes or ‘facets’ of God are held in holy tension with each other.

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attributes of His nature are so clearly revealed as being immutable — or unchanging. Where God appears to us to be ‘harsh’ we need to remember that His punishments were exacted on particular people at particular times. *Those punishments were discharged in a historical setting that has now passed.* So when, for example, God in His sovereignty commands the Israelites to totally destroy the city of Jericho we know that that was done in an historical context which will not recur.<sup>2</sup> No one can say that because God allowed the destruction of Jericho, that we can order the destruction of Birmingham (with apologies to the people of Birmingham, but no doubt readers will see the point we are making) whether in God’s name or in anyone else’s! God’s social concern, however, His concern for the weak, the marginalized, the downtrodden, and the vulnerable remains of relevance today and will always remain relevant so long as there are humans in *this* world. The ‘nasty’ bits, then, if they exist at all (and many people seem to assume that the Old Testament is full of bellicosity) are now dealt with — they are history. It should be added, moreover, that it is unwise to the point of folly for modern people to ‘judge’ God on these issues. Whatever punishments He has exacted, He has exacted with a heavy heart. For example, in Ezekiel 33:11 God says, **“As surely as I live,” declares the Sovereign LORD, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways!”** Again in Matthew 23:37 Jesus lamented over the unbelieving Jews

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to add that, in spite of the fact that these events are now passed and therefore not to be replicated today, they nevertheless contain deep spiritual truths and lessons that are still of great value today. The Old Testament is not therefore some dusty ancient history book. It is the foundation upon which God’s self disclosure in Jesus must be understood. See 1 Corinthians 10 for a biblical perspective on this.

of His day, **“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.”**

In both these verses we see a clear desire on the part of God that the lost turn from their wicked ways and be saved from destruction. Since God has given humans free will, in some ways the most precious gift of all, it is true that those who have rebelled in the most grievous ways (and the sins of the Canaanites were absolutely appalling) have done so with their eyes open.

By the end of the book of Joshua, the Israelites are installed in their promised land. No matter how aggressive it may seem to modern eyes, it was God’s sovereign choice to drive out the Canaanites and to give the land to His chosen people, in exactly the same way that it was His sovereign choice to choose the Israelites to be His covenant people in the first place. In the light of Old Testament history — as this author likes to call it, the *history of the promise*, and in the light of New Testament history (as this author calls it, the *fulfilment of the promise*) we can see real theological sense and continuity in God’s great plan of salvation to be worked out first through a chosen covenant people, and later through a chosen people living under a new covenant. At the end of the book of Joshua, therefore, the Israelites are at the threshold of a new age, and age of self-sovereignty in their own promised land. But God, through Joshua (now a very old man) issues warnings about what the future may hold. We continue to see God’s self-revelation in these passages (Joshua 23:3, 5 and 7):

**You yourselves have seen everything the LORD your God has done to all these nations for your sake; it was the LORD your God who fought for you.**

**<sup>5</sup> The LORD your God himself will drive them out of your way. He will push them out before you, and you will take possession of their land, as the LORD your God promised you.**

**<sup>7</sup> Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them.**

The warning could not be clearer. God had given the Israelites their promised land. Those who ‘remained among’ them were peoples with which they could not safely mingle. And just as important, their ‘gods’ were ones that absolutely must not be allowed to entice the Israelites away from the one, true God. These warnings are continued below (Joshua 23:11–13 and 15–16):

**<sup>11</sup> So be very careful to love the LORD your God. <sup>12</sup> But if you turn away and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations that remain among you and if you intermarry with them and associate with them, <sup>13</sup> then you may be sure that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the LORD your God has given you.**

**<sup>15</sup> But just as every good promise of the LORD your God has come true, so the LORD will bring on you all the evil he has threatened, until he has destroyed you from this good land he has given you. <sup>16</sup> If you violate the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the LORD’s anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you.**

**Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.** (Joshua 24:14–15)

**Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. <sup>20</sup>If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.”** (Joshua 24:19–20)

**“Now then,” said Joshua, “throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.”** (Joshua 24:19–20)

With all these warnings, we see the heart of God deeply concerned at the prospect of His chosen people following other ‘gods’. In the light of these warnings, we need to understand to what extent they continue to apply to God’s people today. It seems difficult to argue that God has somehow changed His mind in allowing the ‘worship’ of other gods, or indeed that the true God has masqueraded Himself in a number of different guises. Once again it is for the Godist to explain or refute this, because this seems to be the position that they have adopted.

## Judges

Immediately after the book of Joshua we find the book of Judges, as the Israelites were to be governed by men raised up by God as prominent leaders who governed on a day to day basis in His place. Sadly, the beginning of this book reads almost as a reversal of the close of Joshua. Although commanded by God to drive out completely all the indigenous Canaanite peoples, we very quickly see that this Command is breached. In 1:27 we read that Mannaseh did not drive out the people of Beth Shan. In v.28 the Israelites choose to put some Canaanites to work for them as forced labourers (presumably little better than slaves). In v.29 Ephraim failed to drive out the indigenous peoples from Gezer, and Zebulun failed to drive out the Canaanites from Kitron or Nahalol. In verse 31 Asher fails to drive out those living in Acco, Sidon and several other villages. In verse 33 Naphtali committed the same sin in relation to the Canaanites of Beth Shemesh and Beth Anath. The stage is set. In chapter 2:10 the inevitable flirtation with foreign 'gods' begins: **After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist.**

**Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted**

**themselves to other gods and worshiped them. Unlike their fathers, they quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked, the way of obedience to the LORD's commands.**

**But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.**

The people are determined to go their own way and this leads to reduction of security and to social decay. By chapter 6 of Judges, the sins of the people have brought Israel to such a low point that once again they cry out to the LORD. God sends them a prophet (v.7) and reminds them they must not worship other 'gods'. Gideon is raised up by God to tear down the shrines to false 'gods' that the Israelites have worshipped. In v.27 he chooses to do this by night — presumably first and foremost as by doing it in this way he will encounter less opposition from the Baalites, but we are left to wonder whether in some way this night action was cowardly or demeaning. Brought right up to date we need to challenge ourselves, are there people in the Churches who should speak out more openly about the ever bolder syncretism that is presently being introduced by Godists into the Church? Is opposition to this syncretism a task for the daylight, or for the night?

Immediately following Judges comes the book of Ruth. Although we inevitably tend to read this as a sort of romantic love story, where the faithful and lovely widow Ruth eventually is married by the honourable and kind Boaz, the account tells us two clear things about God. Firstly what is His concern is for the 'alien' in His promised land, and secondly that God rewards the faithfulness of Ruth,

in exactly the same way that He rewards the faithfulness of His followers in all ages. Following the book of Ruth we find the first book of Samuel. It is not long before the familiar problem of the Israelites *wanting to behave like other nations* once again rears its ugly head. So in 1 Samuel 8:6, the Hebrews are demanding a ‘king’ rather than judges, so that they can be governed like other nations. God warns them as to precisely what possession by a king will mean in practice, but still they persist in their demand. God tells the prophet Samuel, however, that the rejection by the Hebrew people is not of him, Samuel, or even so much of the rule by Judges — it is a much more fundamental rejection: **But when they said, “Give us a king to lead us,” this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. And the LORD told him: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do.”** (1 Samuel 8:6–9)

Chasing after false ‘gods’ will bring disaster for Israel. To rescue Israel from the travails of King Saul, God raises up a future King, the shepherd boy David. Now the promises of the future Saviour Messiah become more overt. So in 2 Samuel 7:10, God rekindles His special covenant with Israel: **And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning . . . .** But the promise goes further. Now God promises to provide, through the line of David, a King who will have a kingdom

that will endure forever: “... **I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.** (2 Samuel 7:12–16)

That David’s line would be established and would pass down to Jesus of Nazareth is a fact of history.<sup>3</sup> God’s promise immediately above seems to have both a near-term and a long-term future outworking. So, we know that David’s son Solomon did actually build the first great Temple to God in Jerusalem. But the *throne* that has been established forever is the throne of King Jesus, and his Kingdom goes down through the ages to the end of time. In all generations since the resurrection of Christ, countless people have put their faith in Him and become His subjects, living in His Kingdom and acknowledging Him as King. Verse 14 above alludes to the fact that Jesus is acknowledged by God to be His Son (see Matthew 4:17). We know that Jesus is without sin — see for example 2 Corinthians 5:21, which would be written nearly a thousand years after the second book of Samuel — **God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.** This is a subject that we will follow up later, but for the time being the reader is asked to note

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<sup>3</sup> Readers who want to follow this up in greater detail may want to refer to *The Birth of Christ* by Peter Sammons (ISBN 0-9551790-1-7 Glory to Glory Publications, 2006)

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the clarity of the Messianic prophecy in 2 Samuel 12ff. As it says in verse 14 **“when he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men.”** This may seem puzzling. As Jesus did no wrong, how and why could God punish Him with the floggings of men? The answer came a thousand years later in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthian church. Jesus *was* flogged (see for example John 19:1) because *Jesus had been made sin* on our behalf. We are straying now into some deeply theological material, but hopefully the reader begins to see the consistency and the purity of God’s revelation. David’s response to God’s promise which has been unveiled in 2 Samuel<sup>7</sup> is given from verse 18 onwards. It is summarized in verse 25f: **And now, LORD God, keep forever the promise you have made concerning your servant and his house. Do as you promised,<sup>26</sup> so that your name will be great forever. Then men will say, ‘The LORD Almighty is God over Israel!’ And the house of your servant David will be established before you.**

In King David we begin to see God’s deep love for His people reciprocated. In spite of being a King who sinned, David can still receive God’s forgiveness and restoration which leads him to offer this prayer of love, to God.<sup>4</sup>

**For I have kept the ways of the LORD;  
I have not done evil by turning from my God.  
All his laws are before me;  
I have not turned away from his decrees.  
I have been blameless before him  
and have kept myself from sin.**

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<sup>4</sup>See also Psalm 51. The wonder remains that despite the enormity of David’s sin, it is overshadowed by God’s mercy. In this there must be an encouragement for all sinners, everywhere!

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**The LORD has rewarded me  
according to my righteousness,  
according to my cleanness in his sight.  
To the faithful you show yourself faithful,  
to the blameless you show yourself blameless,  
to the pure you show yourself pure,  
but to the crooked you show yourself shrewd.  
You save the humble,  
but your eyes are on the haughty to bring them low.  
You are my lamp, O LORD;  
the LORD turns my darkness into light.**

(2 Samuel 22:22–29)

### **A love relationship?**

In King David we begin to see the possibility for all people, everywhere, of a personal love relationship with God, where God knows the penitent sinner and knows him (or her) intimately, but in spite of this He is *still prepared* to acknowledge them before men — and it might be added, before the devil as well — as His beloved and as His child. As Godists tell us that humans worship one God no matter how ‘he’ or ‘it’ has revealed ‘himself’ or ‘itself’, the absence of this great love relationship at a personal level in the main religions is something that the Godist needs to explain. Is it that the Judeo-Christian experience is ‘higher’ than those of the other religions? Indeed, is there a hierarchy of ‘higher religions’ — and if so is this not simply unfair of God in His dealings with these religions?

It was not just David who experienced and enjoyed this love relationship with God. David’s son Solomon was like his father in being a sad mixture of righteousness and purity, and rebellion and sinfulness. But he was still as a penitent sinner able to draw close to God and express his deep love

to God. So in 1 Kings 8:23–27 we read this: **O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below — *you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way.* You have kept your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it — as it is today.**

Now LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father the promises you made to him when you said, ‘You shall never fail to have a man to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your sons are careful in all they do to walk before me as you have done.’ And now, O God of Israel, let your word that you promised your servant David my father come true.

But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! Yet give attention to your servant’s prayer and his plea for mercy, O LORD my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence this day.

It should be noted in verse 23 above that God’s covenant of love continues with those *who continue wholeheartedly to follow Him* — that clause is italicized above by this author so as to emphasize it for the reader. This is an important point and one that often seems to be missed by preachers today. When God expresses His love, it is almost always in the context of His love to His disciples, and those same disciples are to continue wholeheartedly to follow Him. Unconditional love, as so often preached from Western pulpits, is at best only a partially true theology. If readers are surprised by this then it is recommended that they begin over a period of time to read their Bible and to try to note all those references to God’s love, whether in the Old Testament or

the New, where it is *not* clearly stated as being lavished upon His disciples — i.e. those who wholeheartedly follow Him. Once again there seems to be something here that challenges the Godist viewpoint. In the author's experience, many of those who call themselves Godist (by whatever label) have simultaneously chosen *not* to follow Him, but instead to build a theology around what they call the essence of 'god's' teachings wheresoever these may be found and in whatever guise. Will they continue to find themselves at the centre of God's loving attention, or will they see a slow diminution of their relationship with 'god' as they try to discern 'him' or 'it' in the teachings of so many religions?

Solomon continues his prayer of praise as he blesses all the people in God's name: **Praise be to the LORD, who has given rest to his people Israel just as he promised. Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses. May the LORD our God be with us as he was with our fathers; may he never leave us nor forsake us. May he turn our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways and to keep the commands, decrees and regulations he gave our fathers. And may these words of mine, which I have prayed before the LORD, be near to the LORD our God day and night, that he may uphold the cause of his servant and the cause of his people Israel according to each day's need.** (1 Kings 8:56–59)

God responds, as He so often does, with a wonderful, affirmative promise which is coupled with a warning: **"I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised David your father when I said, 'You shall never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel.'**

**"But if you or your sons turn away from me and do not observe the commands and decrees I have given you and go off to serve other gods and worship them,**

**then I will cut off Israel from the land I have given them and will reject this temple I have consecrated for my Name. Israel will then become a byword and an object of ridicule among all peoples. And though this temple is now imposing, all who pass by will be appalled and will scoff and say, ‘Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and to this temple?’ People will answer, ‘Because they have forsaken the LORD their God, who brought their fathers out of Egypt, and have embraced other gods, worshiping and serving them—that is why the LORD brought all this disaster on them.’”** (1 Kings 9:5–10)

Once again the stage seems to be set for that sad cycle of *restoration* followed by *rebellion*, followed by *retribution*. Solomon himself rebelled against God by marrying foreign wives and then following foreign ‘gods’. All so sad, and so predictable: so in 11:1–4 we see Solomon’s sin unfolding. In verse 14 God’s response is both swift and direct: **Then the LORD raised up against Solomon an adversary, Hadad the Edomite, from the royal line of Edom.** This sad cycle is repeated by King Jeroboam who re-establishes the worship of golden calves — chiefly because it is politically expedient for him to do so. There is a high price to be paid for deliberately ignoring God’s clear instruction, as the remainder of Jeroboam’s life seems to indicate. In 1 Kings 22 we encounter the idea that ‘religious’ men will tell their political rulers what they want to hear. This is to be contrasted with true prophets, who generally told their political masters what they did not want to hear! We need to wonder, then, in the early years of the twenty first century, whether the rush towards multi-faith dialogue by some ‘religious’ leaders is exactly that — a desire to tell their ‘king’ what he wants to hear. It is noteworthy that,

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at the time of writing this book, politicians in the UK and the US are offering state funding to those ‘religions’ or ‘faith communities’ that are prepared to get involved in ‘good works’ as directed by the state. We have to wonder, then, whether the temptation of state cash and the public recognition and public applaud that multi-faithism today inevitably brings, is not a powerful incentive to sway people towards the Godist agenda and away from the normative interpretation of Christianity. And indeed perhaps, from the normative interpretations of other religions as well.

In 2 Kings 1 we see the continuation of the pursuit by Israel’s Kings of false ‘gods’. Verse 6 is instructive in this regard. **“Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are sending men to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron?”** Again the comparison with twenty first century Britain seems stark. A country with 1,500 years of active Christian influence and, without too much mind-stretching, 1,500 years of intervention by God at key points in Britain’s history, today seeks the blessing of other ‘gods’, where it is politically expedient. We echo God’s question in 2 Kings 1:6 as we ask the rhetorical question of our leaders; *is it because there is no God in the UK (or US or the various formerly Christian influenced countries) that our leaders feel the necessity to consult other ‘gods’ under the guise of multi-faithism?* Although it does not logically follow on from our rhetorical question, the slightly depressing account in 2 Kings 5 of Naaman’s healing from leprosy, and of the true prophet Elisha’s unfaithful servant Gehazi trying to gain financially from Naaman’s healing does, nevertheless, surely have a modern resonance. Those who cheat God by effectively taking His name in vain will unquestionably face God’s judgement.

By the time we reach 2 Kings 17, Israel’s serial rebellions

against their covenant relationship with God leads to their first exile from the Holy Land. God's malediction against Israel is summarized in 2 Kings 17:14–15: **... they would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their fathers, who did not trust in the LORD their God. They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their fathers and the warnings he had given them. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless. They imitated the nations around them although the LORD had ordered them, "Do not do as they do," and they did the things the LORD had forbidden them to do.**

In 2 Kings 17:17, we find that child sacrifice was again being practiced in the land as the Hebrews had, by imitation, become as bad as the nations they had driven out. It seems so sad that this chosen people, this especial beloved of God, should so rebel and go on rebelling without flagging, until God acts decisively against them.

In 1 and 2 Chronicles we find that some of Israel's kings are faithful to God and others are rebellious. They are certainly a mixed bunch! Among the faithful was Jehoshaphat, who oversaw a general reorientation towards the LORD. As the Israelites return to God, so He grants them success once more against their persecutors (in this case an axis of the Moabites, Ammonites and Meunites) who have come to make war against them. Israel survives and prospers, but still has a divided heart. So we read this, from 2 Chronicles 20:20–21: **Early in the morning they left for the Desert of Tekoa. As they set out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, "Listen to me, Judah and people of Jerusalem! Have faith in the LORD your God and you will be upheld; have faith in his prophets and you will be successful." After consulting the people, Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the LORD and to praise him**

**for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying: “Give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever.”**

This latter we might think as a strange battle cry — ‘his love endures forever’ — but the record is that the invaders were defeated. The summary of the reign of Jehoshaphat is given in the same chapter and vv.32–3. Note that the ‘high places’, those places on hilltops and remote regions where false ‘gods’ were worshipped, remained intact: [Jehoshaphat] **walked in the ways of his father Asa and did not stray from them; he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD. The high places, however, were not removed, and the people still had not set their hearts on the God of their fathers.**

The next good Israelite King is Hezekiah, who encourages his people to return to their true worship of the LORD. Hezekiah reflects the passion of God for forgiveness and for restoration of the covenant relationship (2 Chronicles 30:6–9): **At the king’s command, couriers went throughout Israel and Judah with letters from the king and from his officials, which read: “People of Israel, return to the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, that he may return to you who are left, who have escaped from the hand of the kings of Assyria. Do not be like your fathers and brothers, who were unfaithful to the LORD, the God of their fathers, so that he made them an object of horror, as you see. Do not be stiff-necked, as your fathers were; submit to the LORD. Come to the sanctuary, which he has consecrated forever. Serve the LORD your God, so that his fierce anger will turn away from you. If you return to the LORD, then your brothers and your children will be shown compassion by their captors and will come back to this land, for the**

**LORD your God is gracious and compassionate. He will not turn his face from you if you return to him.”**

Hezekiah makes a profound statement in the same chapter about the goodness of God. That God is good is a basic tenet running throughout the entire Bible. Hezekiah asks for God’s forgiveness for everyone who sets his heart on seeking God. The forgiveness then, will be specific to those who are genuinely penitent. **Although most of the many people who came from Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar and Zebulun had not purified themselves, yet they ate the Passover, contrary to what was written. But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, “May the LORD, who is good, pardon everyone who sets his heart on seeking God—the LORD, the God of his fathers—even if he is not clean according to the rules of the sanctuary.” And the LORD heard Hezekiah and healed the people.** (vv. 18–20.)

### **God is good**

So, God is good. About that the Holy Bible is adamant. But today we tend to forget what ‘good’ truly means — in fact we have devalued the word and robbed it of its majesty. The world’s appreciation of ‘good’ is, for example, a rock star who decides to take up some ‘good cause’. *That* man, we are told, is fundamentally good no matter what other peccadilloes his life may entail! The idea is that in some way God should be grateful to him, for all his selfless work. In other words the world thinks that it can ‘earn’ at least a portion of its salvation from God. Salvation, then, becomes a right rather than a gift freely given to those whose hearts are changed and who totally re-orient their lives towards Jesus. It was Jesus who said, ‘Why call me good? No one is good but God alone’ (in paraphrase — see actual references being Matthew 19:16–17, Mark 10:17 and Luke 18:18). We

should be wary then, in one sense, about how we use this common word ‘good’ for in reality it has a very profound biblical meaning, and should in truth be reserved for God alone. When the Godist talks about discerning ‘good’ in all *the religions* (besides what they are reticent to call ‘bad’ in relation to some of the teachings of those same religions) they are in danger of demeaning God unless they are prepared to say honestly that He has revealed Himself in both good and bad. But if they say this, they must then contradict the Lord Jesus who has declared God, and God alone, to be good. They must also contradict the Holy Bible which also is also emphatic throughout that God is good. It is (faithful) King Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 30:18 who prays for his countrymen when he says “**May the LORD, who is good, pardon everyone who sets his heart on seeking God — the LORD, the God of his fathers — even if he is not clean according to the rules of the sanctuary.**” Because God is good, and delights to restore the truly penitent, He hears Hezekiah’s prayer. The verse concludes simply **And the LORD heard Hezekiah and healed the people.**

The cyclical record of Israel’s faithful and unfaithful Kings continues to the end of 2 Chronicles. We take our leave of this Old Testament book with faithful King Josiah, who originally assumed the throne as a minor (at eight years old). As we are told in chapter 34, Josiah did what was right in the eyes of the LORD. On the rediscovery of the Torah or ‘books of the Law’ in some dusty corner of the Temple (which we assume had been somehow lost in the many upheavals encountered by Israel throughout the long period covered by Kings and Chronicles in the Bible) Josiah seeks to reinstate it at the centre of Israel’s life and worship. 2 Chronicles comments in relation to King Josiah: **Josiah removed all the detestable idols from all the territory**

**belonging to the Israelites, and he had all who were present in Israel serve the LORD their God. As long as he lived, they did not fail to follow the LORD, the God of their fathers.** (2 Chronicles 34:33). Josiah's reign was notable for its success in reorienting Israel to follow the true path to God. But notable, also, for demonstrating the truth of God's forgiveness and restitution. Sadly this otherwise faithful King died in a battle largely of his own making, or so the Bible seems to indicate.

We conclude this chapter on God speaking to His people through the earlier books of the Old Testament, with a few thoughts from the book of Ezra, which follows 2 Chronicles. These thoughts again have resonance with our consideration of what Godism means and how Godist thinking relates to the Holy God revealed in Scripture. Ezra was a prophet at the time that Israel was exiled within the Persian Empire. The book that bears his name has been described as a compilation of autobiography, official documents, edicts and other material. The book is a straightforward account of one of the most important events in Israel's history — the restoration of the Jewish people to their homeland following the Babylonian dispersion.

As the former exiles return to Jerusalem they begin to rebuild the Temple, which has fallen into great disrepair. They begin the work with praise to their loving God (Ezra 3:11) **With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD : “He is good; his love to Israel endures forever.” And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.** Inevitably, in a political world, there is opposition to this rebuilding work, although it is quite clear from the Bible that the root cause of this opposition is demonic. The sound of Israel's rejoicing was heard far away, both literally

and metaphorically and it attracted unwelcome attention. So we read in Ezra 4:1–5, **When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the LORD, the God of Israel, they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, “Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here.”**

**But Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, “You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us.”**

**Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. They hired counselors to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia.** We are bound once again to explore whether there is some resonance to the modern Godist agenda in this. Whilst Christians have for two millennia understood, and rightly understood, the exclusive claims of their Lord Jesus in relation to God His Father, and sought to distance themselves from *the religions*, in much the same way that the Hebrews of the Old Testament were commanded to remain strictly separate from *the religions* of surrounding peoples, do we today see at the beginning of the twenty-first century the offer of ‘help’ in building a new and different ‘temple’ to God? Our politicians and at least some religious leaders offer us the ‘help’ of state funding and of state recognition, in return for interfaith ‘dialogue’. We are offered the assistance of the state and of the media in order to help us to remain ‘relevant’ to society at large through funding to

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assist 'good works' and media air time. It seems that God is no longer dead, but some politicians think He should be on income support. The book of Ezra goes on to describe the oppositions faced in restoring the Promised Land. Some of those who return to Israel and some in Israel itself have intermarried and, inevitably, followed false 'gods'. Again the Godist position seems to be exposed in this: are we today being offered the prospect of 'religious intermarriage' by some of our religious leaders? And is this to be a marriage made in heaven, or a marriage of convenience?