

# Toxic God Syndrome

## *Four Bible Puzzles:*

Leviticus 16:11-13

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I enjoy Bible puzzles. For example, when was tennis first mentioned in the Bible? David served in Saul's court. How about smoking? "And Rebekah lit off on a camel!" How about this? Who is the smallest man in the Bible? I know your thinking Zaccheaus. But not in this puzzle. It's not Ne-hi-miah. That's too tortured and too tall. It's not Job's friend, Bildad the Shuhite. That's closer, however. The smallest man is the jailer who slept on his watch. You have to be exceedingly tiny to fit on a watch and comfortably sleep.

Not all Bible puzzles are groaners. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12 about being caught up to *the third heaven*. The third heaven? How many heavens (or heavenly realms that Paul writes about in Ephesians) are there and what are they like? How do these heavens influence are daily life? Passages like these challenge our perception of the world and our understanding of God.

Puzzles like these may be difficult to understand, but they can open our life to love and truth that will otherwise escape us. Without the truth these puzzles convey, we may suffer a shallow concept of God's love and be naïve in viewing the world. It may be easy to preach about God as I'd like him to be. It may be easy to believe in God as you'd like him to be. However, only when we embrace God as he actually revealed himself can we embrace love as it really is. Then we taste the full power God has for us. You see God inspired all the Scriptures. They all are profitable for instruction, rebuke, correction and training in righteousness. God authored them and preserved them for us. During the next several weeks, I will share Four Bible

Puzzles. There are more, but I hope that our discussion of these will expand your vision of the world, enlarge your appreciation of grace, deepen your love of God and grow your faith in Jesus.

I was in a restaurant sharing new insight I gained about God and the world from the book of Leviticus when a pastor friend said you should call this *Toxic God Syndrome*. You probably have heard of Toxic Shock Syndrome. We became aware of this rare disease back in the late 1970s. Some health products turned lethal for some women by releasing toxins. The victims would go into shock and die. The thing these women trusted to help them brought them death.

What is more helpful than the presence of God? When we talk about the presence of God, we think of love. We think of God's favor and blessing. Peter summarized Jesus' ministry to Cornelius by saying:

***(Jesus) went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.*** (Acts 10:38, NIV)

Jesus had power because God was with him. God's presence is a terrific blessing. In 2 Chronicles 15:9 large numbers of people moved to southern Israel where Asa was king because they noticed that "***God was with him.***" God's presence with Asa and southern Israel brought favor, blessing, peace and prosperity. When Moses received the law of God on Mount Sinai, he came down to find the Israelites worshiping an idol, indulging in revelry and sexual promiscuity. In Exodus 32 and 33, God told Moses to leave Sinai and lead the people to the land of promise. God also said, "If I go with these Israelites for even a moment, I might destroy them." Moses pled, "***If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here***" (Exodus 33:15, NIV). God warned Moses that his Presence, while holy, pure and helpful, also could bring judgment and destruction. Yet God's presence was so vital, so life-giving, so protecting and providing, that Moses would not go without God's presence.

You might be tempted to dismiss God's warning about walking with the Israelites. You may think this is a primitive Old Testament concept. Many Christians dismiss the relevance of the Hebrew Scriptures. They reason that the Old Testament is about judgment and the New Testament is about mercy. They think that the Old Testament presents a vengeful God of wrath and that the New Testament reveals a merciful God of love. However, there are not two gods in the Bible. The God of the Old Testament is the God of the New Testament, and the God of the New Testament is the God of the Old Testament. There is only one God, and he is not schizophrenic. Do you remember the story of the woman caught in adultery who was brought to Jesus? The same God, who granted her mercy through Jesus in John 8, visited death on a Christian couple who lied about their giving to the church in Acts 5. It simply isn't honest to suggest that two different gods are presented in the Bible. There are different emphases but not different gods. The theme of the Old Testament is that there is only one God over heaven and earth, over all nations and people, one to fear, one to obey, and only one to trust. The theme of the New Testament is that this one God, because of his love for you and the whole world, has come in Jesus to liberate you and the world from that which he must judge and destroy.

With that understanding, let's visit the perplexing text in Leviticus. Aaron had just lost two of his sons when they approached God. God warned Aaron not to approach his presence whenever he chooses or he would die. God gave Aaron through Moses specific instructions on how to approach him. Atonement for personal, family and community or national sin was always needed. Aaron had to bathe and put on pure, consecrated garments. He was to enter the presence of God sprinkling blood from that offering. In addition, he was to carry coals from the offering fire in a censer and create a cloud of smoke with incense that kept him from seeing the atonement cover above the Testimony or tablets of stone. Otherwise he would die.

This approach of God took place in a special place called the Tent of Meeting. In Exodus 28:35 Aaron, when approaching God in the Tent of Meeting, had to wear a special robe with bells on its hem that jingled so that he would not die. Why? It doesn't say. In Exodus 28:43 Aaron and his descendents had to wear special undergarments when approaching God so they would not incur guilt and die. Why would their personal undergarments make them liable for death? It doesn't say. In Exodus 30:20-21 the same people had to wash their hands and feet, hands that had touched and feet that had walked on anything in contact with humanity, or they would die. Why? It doesn't say. In Leviticus 8 there was an elaborate ritual of ordination that prepared Aaron and his sons to approach God on behalf of the people. They were required to stay 7 days and nights at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and fulfill all the instructions lest they die. When in Leviticus 9 and 10 Aaron and his sons went through that ordination and began their approach to God, two of Aaron's sons violated these instructions and died. Aaron and his other sons were required to continue, rather than break off in mourning, because they were bringing the necessary forgiveness and blessing to their community and because they were in the holy presence of God. Otherwise they too would die. At one point Moses warned Aaron:

***You must keep the Israelites separate from things that make them unclean, so they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling my dwelling place, which is among them.*** (Leviticus 15:31, NIV)

It is obvious from these passages that the presence of God is toxic to sin and to sinners. Even though, as Jesus taught in Luke 15, God is a heart-broken father longing to embrace the most wayward of his children and even though his presence is everywhere in some manner, there is a separation or distance for our benefit. God's presence, which is love in its absolute purity, is toxic to what is impure.

I don't know your experience with humidifiers, but I need them in winter. My skin gets so dry that I start itching all over. However, there are two things I don't like about humidifiers. First, you have to clean them; and second, they reveal what is in our water. It isn't pretty. We don't have pure water. Our water is full of minerals, and when you clean the humidifier with a vinegar solution the minerals begin to fizz and dissolve. That reaction is a picture of God's pure presence coming into contact with impurity. Thus, Aaron had to be enveloped with the smoke of atonement. His robe jingled with the repentance of his people. His body and undergarments were free of the defilement of humanity. Then God would live with and bless the Israelite people that he longed to embrace.

This elaborate work of removing the defilement we experience from community, family and personal sin is embraced by Jesus. God's nature has not changed, so that he has become indulgent or permissive. The New Testament writer of Hebrews said that without holiness no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). Jesus is called the Bread of life and instituted a meal where we eat his flesh and drink his blood. As we receive Jesus, we welcome cleansing. We seek forgiveness. We ask Jesus through his Spirit to remove the garbage, the impurities, the defilement in our lives, so that our hearts are pure and God's powerful, blessing presence embraces us.

God's presence in Jesus brought healing. God's presence in Jesus fed the hungry. God's presence in Jesus brought safety. God's presence in Jesus overcame every force in the heavens and earth. That's why Moses wanted God's presence. Don't you? Don't you want the fullness of God in your life? Don't you want to be full of the same Spirit that was in Jesus? Can you imagine the blessing that would bring you and those around you? That's God's kingdom! It's for you, and it is also for our community, our nation and world.