

A Fearsome God?

By Anand Peter

Scripture Reading: Hosea 5:12-14; John 3:16

*Therefore will I be unto Ephraim as a moth, and to the house of Judah as rottenness
(Hosea 5:12).*

I recall an illustration I preached when I delivered my first-ever sermon, decades ago. There was a family: a mother, a father, a son, and a daughter. The parents often spoke of a grand old great-grandfather who lived in a large mansion, and were full of praise for him and his vast wealth. When the children insisted upon a visit, the parents took them one Sunday to the mansion. The parents' description proved right to a T. The tall old man, with hair and beard whiter than white, welcomed the children and took them around, showing them everything. Then he took them down to the basement. It was rather dark down there, and the children were a little afraid. Next, he took them down another level. They began to hear faint sounds of screams and the gnashing of teeth. From the level below that, they saw people in huge pits of fire, and hellish creatures roaming about. They ran back up to their parents, scared stiff, but said nothing, for fear of the old man. On the drive home, the parents asked the children, "Do you love your great-grandfather? Will you go to church every Sunday?" After a long pause, the children replied, in faint, trembling voices, "Yes."

I recall reading, some time ago, words I have since traced to the American writer Flannery O'Connor: "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures" (from her essay "The Fiction Writer and His Country," in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, 1969). That is exactly what the parents in the illustration did: they tried to frighten the children into the faith. That is also what the narratives of the Old Testament can do to a first-time reader. They give an image of a fearsome God — a God who seems to be waiting to swat you like a fly the moment you err.

The effect of the illustration, and of a first reading of the Old Testament, shows how the grace of Christ can seem violent when it pierces a hardened heart. I have heard people say that Christianity is a hard religion. In Hosea 5:12, we hear God saying, "Therefore will I be unto Ephraim as a moth, and to the house of Judah as rottenness." It is a startling comparison: God describes Himself as a moth, or maggot, and as rot, to His own people. His people are like soldiers whose open wounds are festering; God is the gangrene, letting them experience the full effect of their sin. The final metaphor for God, in verse 14, is a lion, who would tear them to pieces and carry them off, with none to rescue them.

I see this shock effect as necessary for us to understand the true gravity of our sin. But if you stop at the Old Testament, and do not move on into the love, compassion, forgiveness, and redemption revealed in Jesus in the New Testament, you would live in fear all your life. That is not how Jesus intends us to live. He has assured us that when He is on our side, nothing and no one can harm us. The true image of God is reflected in Jesus Christ. It is not that God suddenly decided to become compassionate and forgiving; He was all of that, and is all of that, from eternal past to eternal future. Sometimes I think a newcomer to the faith should be encouraged to read the Gospel accounts before being introduced to the Old Testament.

Having said that, I want to leave you with a few questions to ponder in your quiet times: Are you “blind and hard of hearing,” like Hosea’s audience? Is there something Jesus is trying to show you that you do not see? What is God trying to tell you that you refuse to hear? Answer these questions honestly, and you will see a benevolent God — One Who loves you so much that He gave His only begotten Son as a ransom for you (compare John 3:16).

Amen.