

Sinners in the Hands

The Scandalous Truth
of the Very Good News

of a Loving God



Brian
Zahnd

Praise for
Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God

“With the heart of a pastor and the skill of a poet, Brian Zahnd cuts through all the fear and fundamentalism to reveal a gospel that is indeed good news. *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God* is a beautifully written, pointed, and prophetic tribute to the love of God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. As Zahnd shows us, this love is not weak; it’s not a safe, feel-good cop-out. Rather, it’s the very revelation of God, the force that changes the world.”

—RACHEL HELD EVANS, author of *Searching
for Sunday*

“The same attributes that make Brian Zahnd a great pastor make him a gifted author: he’s honest, humble, willing to change his mind, and unfailingly centered on Christ. For him to reconsider his view of God took study and prayer, and we benefit. *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God* will be an extraordinary gift to many, for it clearly and compellingly teaches God’s love. This is the book that the evangelical church needs.”

—TONY JONES, author of *Did God Kill Jesus?*

“Brian Zahnd walks boldly into the violent propensity of so much Christian theology and preaching that has wounded so many people, a propensity in which he himself has participated. He not only shows what bad, irresponsible theology this is, pervasive as it continues to be; he exposes the ‘hackneyed trope of dispensationalism’ that feeds so much worldly violence and that

authorizes so much wounding. But more than that, in his poetic mode, Zahnd invites to an alternative that is grounded not in ‘Biblicism’ but in the reality of Jesus who embodies the inexplicable love of God that passes all human understanding. Zahnd writes as one emancipated to evangelical joy. He invites his readers to walk with him into such a God-given vocation that honors the God of love and that loves the neighbor.”

—WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, Columbia Theological Seminary

“I know we’re a bit too quick to say things like ‘This will change your life!’ these days, but seriously: this book will change your life. For too long, too many of us have wondered if God is angry or disappointed or frustrated or disgusted with us: you don’t need to wonder anymore. Brian’s new book is one of the most beautiful, truthful, and compelling visions of God as revealed by Jesus I have ever read. I can’t shut up about this glorious, necessary, healing book: it is a must-read for every Christian.”

—SARAH BESSEY, author of *Jesus Feminist* and *Out of Sorts: Making Peace with an Evolving Faith*

“I can’t count the times I felt like standing and cheering while reading this book. Brian Zahnd knows his material extremely well. He speaks from a blend of study and experience, with the authority of a theologian, the care of a shepherd, and the inspiring beauty of a poet. From Genesis to Revelation, Brian helps us identify, expose, and oppose the weaponization of Scripture and instead embrace Jesus as the Bible’s central theme and

God's ultimate self-disclosure. If you read one book about Jesus this year . . . buy mine. But if you read two, this one will do just nicely."

—BRUXY CAVEY, teaching pastor at the Meeting House, and author of *The End of Religion* and *(re)union: the Good News of Jesus for Seekers, Saints, and Sinners*

"With too many American Christian leaders echoing the angry, arrogant, vindictive, and violent rhetoric of our political culture, it's hard to imagine a book more relevant and needed than Brian Zahnd's *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*. Zahnd rightly helps us see that for better or worse, we reflect the image of the God we believe in. Zahnd's insights into Scripture are rich and deep, making clear that if we want a less violent future, we need a vision of a nonviolent God."

—BRIAN D. McLAREN, author of *The Great Spiritual Migration*

"I have come to love Brian Zahnd and his writings. They are deep, reflective, authentic, and inspiring. *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God* is a brilliant and important book that every Christian should read. If you've ever struggled with the violence attributed to God in Scripture, or the angry and vengeful images of God sometimes taught in Christian circles, this book will speak to you."

—ADAM HAMILTON, pastor and author of *Making Sense of the Bible*

Foreword by William Paul Young

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Brian Zahnd



WATERBROOK

SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF A LOVING GOD

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In memory of L. Glen Zahnd

1931–2009

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Foreword

There is a chapter in the novel *Cross Roads*, which I wrote after *The Shack*, called “The War Within.” This war is between our heads and our hearts, between our experiences of past and present, between the false self with all the lies that have become sanctuaries and the Truth that tenderly invades its domain, between what we thought to be right and the path we seem to be traveling. Below the chapter title in the novel is the following quote:

The apostle tells us that “God is love”; and therefore, seeing he is an infinite being, it follows that he is an infinite fountain of love. Seeing he is an all-sufficient being, it follows that he is a full and overflowing, and inexhaustible fountain of love. And in that he is an unchangeable and eternal being, he is an unchangeable and eternal fountain of love.

Partway through the chapter, the main character, Tony, finds himself in a monstrous battle. His accusers are caricatures of his own false self, liars and pretenders. They use god-language and throw back into his face his own deepest secrets. Among the language of their attack are phrases such as,

. . . pour out your just and holy fury, the bow of your wrath bent and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bending the arrow at their hearts . . .

The quotes above were written by the same man, Jonathan Edwards. The fiery language of accusation was delivered in his famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” and the other line was from his “Heaven, a World of Charity, or Love” in *Charity and Its Fruits*.

What happened between a beautiful expression of a God of First Love and the jarring explosion of a vindictive being focused on retributive justice? Was this a movement or a constant tension within him?

We will never know for sure, but during his lifetime, Edwards experienced significant personal losses. He changed his mind on public issues and was eventually ostracized by his own congregation. After witnessing injustice, he took a stand against slavery and became an advocate for the indigenous tribal people. Visitors would come to hear him speak, but his own people would not. Edwards knew personally about the war within.

Dr. Baxter Kruger refers to this inner tension as the windshield wiper of the soul that vacillates between two visions of God. The first is powerful and transcendent, a God of glory or might, sitting on a distant throne wrapped in unapproachable light. While this transcendent imagination of God might inspire awe and fear, it does not generate relational embrace or ease.

But there is a second, qualitatively divergent vision of God that also attracts us. It doesn't begin with the mind trying to grasp the immensity and grandeur of God, but the heart that yearns for beauty and the wonder of being well loved. This is the God of my deepest longings, the One whom I can taste in the rhythms of music and creativity, catch glimpses of in my encounters with love, and feel embraced in the holy encounter with an 'other.' This is the whisper of the Spirit and the gentle touch of love.

It should be no surprise that we are naturally attracted to both. We not only experience this flip-flop within our own soul's journey, but this windshield-wiper effect is evident throughout Scripture. The psalmist and the prophet move back and forth, sometimes within the same verse: light and dark, good and evil, power and comfort, transcendence and immanence, faithfulness and abandonment.

Into this polarity is introduced an astounding event that reframes everything—Jesus!—the incarnation of the transcendent God directly into the deepest longings and aspirations of our humanity. In Jesus everything is brought together, all the disparate extensions of our mindful grasping after the transcendent God, and the scattered but viscerally real pursuit of an integrated and relational love with an immanent God. Both our understanding and experience of God must be grounded in our Christology. Apart from Jesus, we can do, know, be nothing.

Every author writes something they later regret. Every preacher wishes they could take something back that they once

delivered as truth. If transformation is by the renewal of the mind and I have never changed my mind, then be assured I am actively resisting the work of the Holy Spirit in my life. Everyone who grows, changes.

But it is hard work to change, to be open, to take the risk of trust. Change always involves death and resurrection, and both are uncomfortable. Death because it involves letting go of old ways of seeing, of abandoning sometimes precious prejudices. It means having to ask for forgiveness and humble ourselves. And resurrection is no easy process either; having to take risks of trust that were not required when everything seemed certain, agreeing with the new ways of seeing while not obliterating the people around you, some who told you what they thought was true but isn't after all.

Transformation is not easy; ask any butterfly.

In this book, Brian Zahnd is pushing Jesus into the middle of our windshield-wiper conversations about God. This is not an exercise in being right but an invitation to know God, who we discover is a Person. Therefore, this book is about a relationship full of mystery and the loss of control, which is another way of talking about trust. As difficult as the transformation feels, the result is something almost too beautiful for words—resurrection.

—WM. PAUL YOUNG,
author of *The Shack*, *Cross Roads*,
Eve, and *Lies We Believe About God*

Sinners in the Hands
of a Loving God

Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” It’s a Puritan classic. An American greatest hit. A revered revivalist text. I had my own handmade copy. I assembled photocopies of this 250-year-old sermon into a homemade booklet. This was back when cutting and pasting were done with scissors and glue. I carefully collated and stapled the twenty pages. My favorite passages were highlighted in bright pink. I provided it with a blue card-stock cover. The title was handwritten with a heavy black marker: “Sinners in the Hands of an ANGRY GOD.” Yes, I wrote *ANGRY GOD* in all caps. Thirty years later I still have this artifact from my angry-God days. It serves as a reference point to give perspective on my long spiritual journey away from an angry, violent, retributive God toward the God who is revealed by Jesus as our loving Father.

I fashioned my handmade copy of Jonathan Edwards’s famous sermon because I was fascinated by it. I wanted to memorize portions for my preaching arsenal. This famous sermon preached on July 8, 1741, has long been associated with the Great Awakening, and as a young pastor I wanted to help lead a new spiritual awakening in America . . . or at least in my fledgling church. My logic was as simple as it was naive: if it worked for Jonathan Edwards, it should work for me. If

Edwards could scare people into repentance, maybe I could too. Evangelism by terrorism. Conversion by coercion. Edwards's sensational sermon is eighteenth-century hellfire preaching in its most articulate form. Most modern Americans become acquainted with "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" in school where, for some strange reason, it is a standard example of descriptive writing. Probably the most famous part of the sermon is the spider passage.

The God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.¹

Lovely, isn't it? God depicted as a sadistic juvenile dangling spiders over a fire. We do have to admit the writing is descriptive. I'm sure Edgar Allan Poe would be impressed. We feel the revulsion Edwards intends as he shifts the analogy of how God views sinners from loathsome spiders to venomous snakes.

1. Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," in *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God and Other Puritan Sermons* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005), 178.

Most of us don't care much for spiders and snakes. But here's the question: Is it true? Is it true that God is so dreadfully provoked to wrath by our sin that he looks upon us as abominable snakes and loathsome spiders? Does God *abhor* sinners and view them as worthy of nothing else than to be cast into hell-fire? Well, that's what Jonathan Edwards said, and as a twenty-five-year-old preacher I believed it. Who was I to argue with the great revivalist? So let the gospel terrorizing begin! The spider passage may be the most well-known part of Edwards's most famous sermon, but my favorite part was toward the end when Edwards is hammering home the everlasting nature of God's wrath.

It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity: there will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery: When you look forward, you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all; you will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance; and then when you have so done, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this

manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains.²

Welcome to God's torture chamber! The Almighty's eternal Auschwitz. A divine perfection of pain and misery. Edwards describes hell as he imagines it as "exquisite horrible misery" emanating from "almighty merciless vengeance." Abandon all hope, ye who enter here! But, again, is it true? Is God actually merciless in vengeance? Is God really an omnipotent Dr. Mengele inflicting eternal torture? I know we can cobble together disparate Bible verses to create this monstrous deity, but is it true? Many preachers and parishioners have been led to think so. For them, believing in a sadistic God who maintains a gruesome dungeon of horrors is simply being faithful to the Bible. But is it? At last Edwards brings his horror-genre sermon to a thunderous close with this:

The wrath of Almighty God is now undoubtedly hanging over a great part of this congregation. Let every one fly out of Sodom: *Haste and escape for your lives, look not behind you, escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed.*³

They tell us that Edwards's congregation was pretty shook up by this sermon; some even writhed on the floor, begging

2. Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," 181–82.

3. Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," 184.

God for mercy, which, I suppose, means the sermon was a success. Once the congregation had been sufficiently traumatized, Jesus could now, according to Edwards's gospel, save them from this enraged God who was on the verge of torturing them forever. What a relief! Of course, those parishioners may suffer from a spiritual post-traumatic stress disorder for the rest of their lives, but that's a small price to pay for being rescued from an eternity of "exquisite horrible misery." Yet the question still remains: Is it true?

At this point I should clarify that Jonathan Edwards's most famous sermon is not representative of his entire preaching ministry. He wasn't always terrorizing his congregation with lurid depictions of hell, and it may be unfair that his best-known sermon is "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Nevertheless, Edwards preached that sermon, and it has left its mark on the religious imagination of America. It is generally regarded as the most important sermon in American history. And this is a tragedy. It's regrettable this sermon has shaped the American vision of God for nearly three centuries. Of course, all sermons are preached within a context, and Reverend Edwards was apparently the pastor of a particularly difficult and contentious church. As a pastor I can sympathize with being so fed up with a congregation that you want to call them a bunch of loathsome insects that God is ready to fling into the fire, but still, *is it true?!* Does God really hate sinners? Is the heart of God really a volcano of seething rage? Is the living God really an angry God?

By the time I encountered Edwards's "Angry God" sermon—as Christian theology and not just creative writing—I was a pastor in my twenties and fascinated with revivalism. I saw angry-God preaching as a legitimate means of scaring people into accepting Jesus. The end justified the means. Getting people to respond to the altar call justified preaching a mean God. Threaten them with an angry God so they would accept a merciful Jesus. A kind of good cop/bad cop technique of evangelism. Use the angry God as a cudgel to coerce conversion. I was adept at this kind of preaching. Angry-God preaching got results.

The first seeds of an angry-God theology were sown much earlier in my life, and they came in the form of cartoons—the infamous gospel tracts by J. T. Chick. These little cartoon pamphlets were a kind of lowbrow version of Edwards's "Angry God" sermon. With titles like "This Was Your Life," "Somebody Goofed," "The Awful Truth," and "Are Roman Catholics Christians?" Chick tracts usually end with everyone but fundamentalist Christians being hurled into what looks like the fires of Mount Doom by a merciless God depicted as a faceless white giant.

A well-meaning but unhelpful Sunday school teacher gave me a Chick tract when I was twelve, and those garish images with their ludicrous theology burned their way into my adolescent imagination. I had met the angry God! And I was afraid, very afraid. Who wouldn't be? Think about it. In the gospel

according to J. T. Chick, if you don't believe *just right*, an omnipotent giant will consign you to eternal torture! Fortunately, I could believe in Jesus and be saved from his Father—the angry God. But then I heard a revival preacher ask a disturbing question: “Do you believe in Jesus in your *heart* or just in your *head*?” He went on to say that if we believed in Jesus in our *heads* but not our *hearts*, we would miss heaven by eighteen inches and wind up in hell forever! More anxiety-inducing theology! Now I had to decide if I had faith in my heart or if I was on my way to hell because I only believed in Jesus with my head. That's a lot of pressure for a twelve-year-old . . . or anyone. I had grown up believing in Jesus, but now I had to decide if I was believing with my head or my heart. My eternal destiny was at stake. If I got it wrong, I would be tortured forever. But how could I know? How could I be sure? I thought I believed in Jesus with my heart, but that thought was in my head, so . . . let the madness begin! What I did know was that I liked Jesus, but I was really scared of his Dad, the faceless white giant with obvious anger issues who hurled Catholics and others who didn't believe *just right* into the fires of Mount Doom. And presumably some of those hapless souls thrown into hell were Baptist kids who tried to believe in Jesus with their hearts but really only believed in Jesus in their heads. That kind of theology is a prescription for religious psychosis! The image of the angry God haunted my adolescence. Did the specter of the angry God help me toe the line? Maybe. Maybe not. But that's

not the question. The real question isn't "Does it scare kids straight?" but "Is it *true*?" The real question isn't "Does it motivate people to pray a sinner's prayer?" but "Is it faithful to the God revealed in Jesus?" Is God accurately represented when depicted as a faceless and remorseless white giant whose anger fuels the raging flames of hell?

Fortunately, Jonathan Edwards and J. T. Chick weren't the only preachers presenting portraits of God. Consider an excerpt from another sermon, this one from the prophet Jeremiah. Speaking in the name of God, Jeremiah says,

Oh! Ephraim is my dear, dear son,
my child in whom I take pleasure!
Every time I mention his name,
my heart bursts with longing for him!
Everything in me cries out for him.
Softly and tenderly I wait for him.⁴

There's nothing about loathsome spiders and venomous serpents in this sermon. (Though I admit that if you *want* to find passages like that in the Bible, you can.) In Jeremiah's sermon we find a beautiful bit of poetry channeling the heart of God for beloved Ephraim. And who is Ephraim? Ephraim is Israel in the seventh century BC. More significantly, Ephraim

4. Jeremiah 31:20, MSG.

is Israel in its worst spiritual condition and lowest moral ebb. Ephraim is idolatrous, adulterous, backslid, covenant-breaking, sinful Israel. But Ephraim is still the child of God, and Jeremiah reveals God's unconditional love for his prodigal son, the wayward Ephraim. Seven centuries before the full revelation of God that will come with Jesus, Jeremiah's poetry captures the heart of God toward sinners. This is the heart of God toward me. Toward you. This is the good news that God is love. At our worst, at our most sinful, at our furthest remove from God and his will, God's attitude toward us remains one of unwavering love. J. T. Chick and his menacing portraits of God are wrong. As it turns out, God is neither menacing nor faceless. Jesus Christ is the face of the Father. The apostle Paul said it this way: "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."⁵ Jesus is the One who shows us the face, the countenance, the disposition, the attitude of the Father. The apostle John is very bold when he tells us, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."⁶ That is an audacious claim. For when John says, "No one has ever seen God," we could use the Bible to argue with the apostle. What about Abraham? He saw God and shared a meal with him under the oaks of Mamre. What about Jacob? He

5. 2 Corinthians 4:6.

6. John 1:18.

saw God at the top of that ladder as the angels ascended and descended at Bethel. What about Moses? He met God face to face. What about the seventy elders of Israel? They too saw God on the top of Mount Sinai. What about Isaiah? He saw God “in the year that King Uzziah died . . . and the train of his robe filled the temple.”⁷ What about Ezekiel? He saw visions of God by the river Chebar in Babylon. With these biblical proof texts we could argue with John’s claim that no one has ever seen God. But I can imagine John replying, “You don’t have to teach me the Bible. I know all the stories, from Genesis to Malachi. But no matter what visions, dreams, revelations, epiphanies, theophanies, or Christophanies people had in times past, they pale into insignificance when compared to the full revelation of God that we have in Jesus Christ!” Then the writer of Hebrews chimes in to affirm what John has said: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son. . . . He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being.”⁸ God has a face and he looks like Jesus. God has a disposition toward sinners and it’s the spirit of Jesus. This is the beautiful gospel. God is not the faceless white giant of a Chick tract. God is like Jesus. God has always been like Jesus. There has never been a time when God was not like Jesus; we haven’t always known this, but now we do. God is like Jesus! God is not

7. Isaiah 6:1, ESV.

8. Hebrews 1:1–3.

a sadistic monster who abhors sinners and dangles them over a fiery pit. God is exactly how Jesus depicted him in his most famous parable: a father who runs to receive, embrace, and restore a prodigal son. It's not a Chick tract or a Puritan sermon that perfectly reveals the nature of God, but Jesus! This is why I deeply reject the horrid distortion of God given to us in the angry-God motifs. I understand how this image of God can be justified. I understand we can use the Bible as our palette to paint a monstrous portrait of God, but when we're finished, if the image doesn't look like Jesus, we have got it wrong! It's a false and distorted portrait. Having seen the face of God in Jesus Christ, I cannot abide J. T. Chick's faceless giant or Jonathan Edwards's angry God. Neither could the great George MacDonald.

George MacDonald was a nineteenth-century Scottish novelist, poet, preacher, lecturer, mystic, and theologian. His influence on seminal thinkers and writers seems to exceed his fame among the general public. G. K. Chesterton, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Lewis Carroll were all enormously influenced by George MacDonald. C. S. Lewis said of him, "I have never concealed the fact that I regarded him as my master; indeed I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him."⁹ Regarding the portrait of God found in Jonathan Edwards's "Angry God" sermon, George MacDonald says this:

9. C. S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (New York: HarperCollins, 1946), xxxvii.

I desire to wake no dispute, will myself dispute with no man, but for the sake of those whom certain *believers* trouble, I have spoken my mind. I love the one God seen in the face of Jesus Christ. From all copies of Jonathan Edwards's portrait of God, however faded by time, however softened by the use of less glaring pigments, I turn with loathing. Not such a God is he concerning whom was the message John heard from Jesus, *that he is light, and in him is no darkness at all.*¹⁰

George MacDonald was right, just as the apostle John was right. People have never seen God until they see Jesus. Every other portrait of God, from whatever source, is subordinate to the revelation of God given to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Word of God, the *Logos* of God, the Logic of God in the form of human flesh. Christians are to believe in the perfect, infallible, inerrant Word of God—and his name is Jesus. Jesus is the icon of the invisible God.¹¹ So whether it's Jonathan Edwards's Puritan sermon or J. T. Chick's fundamentalist tracts, we have to ask, does this portrait of God look like Jesus? We must reject these monstrous portraits of God because Jesus said things like “Whoever sees me sees him who sent me”¹² and “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”¹³ But still many of us struggle with an image

10. George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons* (Whitehorn, CA: Johannesen, 2011), 540, italics in the original.

11. See Colossians 1:15.

12. John 12:45.

13. John 14:9.

of God that is angry, violent, and vindictive and that bears little resemblance to the Jesus who was the friend of sinners. These distorted images of God come from many sources, and not all of them are Puritan sermons and fundamentalist tracts. Some of these images are picked up from the Bible, especially certain depictions of God found in the Old Testament. It's true that we can piece together a mosaic of a malicious God by selecting the most gruesome passages of the Bible. But this doesn't mean we have revealed God as he is. Sometimes the Bible is like a Rorschach test: our interpretation of the text reveals more about ourselves than about God. However else we address the problem of proof-texting an angry God, we must always remember that any depiction of God, from whatever source, is subordinate to the revelation of God seen in Jesus. If the mystery of God is a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle, the picture on the cover of the box is the face of Jesus! Jesus is the face of God, the icon of God, the Word of God, the divine Logos made flesh.¹⁴ This is a recurring theme among the New Testament writers. What the Bible does infallibly is point us to Jesus. The Bible itself is not a perfect picture of God, but it does point us to the One who is. This is what orthodox Christianity has always said.

We also need to keep in mind that the Old Testament doesn't give us just one portrait of God but many. It's impossible to make the Old Testament univocal. The Old Testament is

14. See John 1:1–14.

a chorus of voices, and they're not always in perfect harmony. The Old Testament is often a theological debate with both sides making their case. Proverbs and Job have differing stories to tell. Proverbs says if you fear God and do what is right, good things will happen to you. And there's truth in that. But Job says that's not always the whole story by telling his tragic tale showing how bad things can happen to good people. Then there's this question: Does God require animal sacrifice? The priests and Levites say yes, and that's what we find in the Torah. But eventually the psalmists and prophets begin to challenge this. David says, "Sacrifice and offering you do *not* desire. . . . Burnt offering and sin offering you have *not* required."¹⁵ In this psalm David brashly contradicts the Torah's unambiguous laws requiring animal sacrifice! Later Hosea claims that God doesn't want sacrifice but mercy.¹⁶ Eventually Jesus will weigh in and affirm the position of Hosea.¹⁷ Does that mean that the Torah is wrong about animal sacrifice? That would be to put too fine a point on it. Rather, the Old Testament is a journey of discovery. The Bible doesn't stand above the story it tells, but is fully enmeshed in it. The Bible itself is on the quest to discover the Word of God. What we find in the Old Testament is a progression of revelation. The Old Testament begins with a primitive assumption that God requires ritual sacrifice but eventually

15. Psalm 40:6.

16. See Hosea 6:6, NKJV.

17. See Matthew 9:13; 12:7.

moves away from that position. We simply can't make Moses and Hosea agree perfectly. If we want to just pluck a verse here and there to proof-text something, the Old Testament gives us many (and often contradictory) options. There are plenty of angry-God texts in the Old Testament, but we also find Jeremiah's tenderhearted Father longing for sinful Ephraim. In the Old Testament God is portrayed as both quick to anger and slow to anger.¹⁸ It's Jesus who settles the dispute.

One of the main challenges in talking about God is the problem of metaphor. We cannot talk about God without using metaphor; it's the only option we have when speaking of the supremely transcendent. But to literalize a metaphor is to create an idol and formulate an error. For example, God is not a man, not a rock, not a tower, not a fortress, not a hen, not a husband, not a mother, not a warrior, not a charioteer, not a farmer, not a king . . . even though the Bible uses all these metaphors to talk about God. We can use these metaphors, but we can't literalize them. The only way to deal with this problem is to create a multitude of metaphors and occasionally retire some that have outlived their usefulness. The wrath of God is a biblical metaphor we use to describe the very real consequences we suffer from trying to go through life against the grain of love. Canadian theologian Brad Jersak says, "The wrath of God is understood as divine consent to our own self-destructive defiance."¹⁹ When we sin against the

18. Compare Psalm 2:12 and Exodus 34:6.

19. Brad Jersak, e-mail message to the author, February 27, 2016.

two great commandments—to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves—we suffer the inevitable consequences of acting against love. We can call this the wrath of God if we like; the Bible does, but that doesn't mean that God literally loses his temper. God no more literally loses his temper than he literally sleeps, even though the Bible says, "The Lord awoke as from sleep."²⁰ Literalizing a divine metaphor always leads to error. We easily acknowledge that God is not literally a rock and not literally a hen, but we have tended to literalize the metaphor of divine anger. Yet even in the Old Testament there are hints of how we can better understand the wrath of God. One of those hints is found in Psalm 7.

God is a righteous judge,
and a God who has indignation every day.

If one does not repent, God will whet his sword;
he has bent and strung his bow;
he has prepared his deadly weapons,
making his arrows fiery shafts.²¹

These three verses, laden with metaphor, make it sound as if God directly visits retribution upon sinners with personal indignation. But the next three verses give us a different perspective.

20. Psalm 78:65.

21. Psalm 7:11–13.

See how they conceive evil,
and are pregnant with mischief,
and bring forth lies.
They make a pit, digging it out,
and fall into the hole that they have made.
Their mischief returns upon their own heads,
and on their own heads their violence descends.²²

These verses reveal that what we may call the whetted sword of God's vengeance is, on a deeper level, the reciprocal consequences of seeking to harm others. These sinners fall into their own diabolical traps and their violence boomerangs back onto their own heads. But here I need to make something very clear: *that God's wrath is a biblical metaphor does not make the consequences of sin any less real or painful.* The revelation that God's single disposition toward sinners remains one of unconditional love does not mean we are exempt from the consequences of going against the grain of love. When we live against the grain of love we suffer the shards of self-inflicted suffering. This is the "wrath of God." But we must not literalize this metaphor so that we end up saying, as Jonathan Edwards said, "God . . . abhors you."²³ This is only a few steps removed from the tragicomic antics of the Westboro Baptist folk as they tell us with absolute certitude whom it is that God hates. Their

22. Verses 14–16.

23. Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," 178.

obsession with an angry God has placed them on a trajectory that ends with a “God is hate” theology. The apostle John, working from the assumption that God is fully revealed in Jesus, arrives at the opposite conclusion: “God is love.”²⁴

What I want you to know is that God’s attitude, God’s spirit, toward you is one of unwavering fatherly-motherly love. You have nothing to fear from God. God is not mad at you. God has never been mad at you. God is never going to be mad at you. And what about the fear of God? The fear of God is the wisdom of not acting against love. We fear God in the same way that as a child I feared my father. I had the good fortune to have a wise and loving father, and I had deep respect, reverence, admiration, and, perhaps, a kind of fear for my father, but I never for one moment thought that my dad hated me or would harm me. God does not hate you, and God will never harm you. But your own sin, if you do not turn away from it, will bring you great harm. The wisdom that acknowledges this fact is what we call the fear of God. Sin is deadly, but God is love.

I know some will be quick to remind me that the writer of Hebrews tells us, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”²⁵ And no doubt it is. In the hands of God, there is no place to hide. We have to be honest with ourselves about ourselves. In the hands of God, we can no longer live in the disguise of our lies. In the hands of God, we have to face ourselves. And

24. 1 John 4:8, 16.

25. Hebrews 10:31.

that can be terrifying. When the prodigal son returned home and fell into the arms of his father, I'm sure the boy felt afraid. We can tell by how he immediately speaks of his unworthiness: "I am no longer worthy to be called your son."²⁶ This wayward son has fallen into the hands of his father; his fate is in his father's hands . . . and he is afraid. But there is no better place to be! This gracious father in Jesus's parable is given to us as a picture of our heavenly Father! When the prodigal son fell fearfully into the hands of his father, forgiveness, healing, and restoration began. Just because the prodigal son felt fear as he fell into his father's hands doesn't mean he had anything to fear from his father. In his father's hands was the only safe place to be. It was in the far country that the prodigal son was in danger, not in his father's hands. When we fall into the hands of the living God, we are sinners in the hands of a loving God.

Because of a tendency to literalize anger metaphors, there are portraits of God as a faceless white giant and portraits of God as a merciless torturer. But Jesus gives us a different portrait: the portrait of a loving and forgiving father. This is the portrait that preachers and theologians and artists should work from. In 1669 the great Dutch painter Rembrandt turned Jesus's parable into one of his masterpieces: *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Today this painting hangs in the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia, where I have seen it more than once. It always

26. Luke 15:21.

brings tears to my eyes. There's a reason Henri Nouwen once sat in front of the painting for eight hours.

In Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son* the reckless son has returned home from the far country. This boy has been to hell and you can tell. He's clothed in dirty and torn rags, which are in stark contrast to the luxurious robes of his father. He has the shaved head of a prisoner, and his shoes have nearly disintegrated. The boy is kneeling in humility with his face buried in his father's chest. Rembrandt has worked with color and light in such a way that our eyes are drawn to the hands of the father as they rest tenderly upon his son. Strangely, the right hand is feminine and the left hand is masculine. Of course, this is not due to some deficiency in the skill of the painter. Rembrandt seems to want to capture both the fatherly and motherly natures of God's love. This masterpiece is a portrait of a sinner in the hands of a loving God. Those of us who know the story realize that those hands will soon present his son with a rich robe, new shoes, and a costly ring. Then those hands will clap with authority as the father orders the preparation of a great feast to celebrate the return of his long-lost son. The prodigal son fell with fear into the hands of his father, but in doing so he fell into the hands of a loving father. This is infinitely more beautiful than the tawdry ugliness of a Chick tract.

But the wrath of God is not absent from Jesus's parable of the prodigal son. After the younger son left his father's house, the consequences of his sin eventually caught up with him in

the far country, and the boy ended up living with the pigs. Call this the wrath of God if you like. But never think that the father was mad at his son. He was not. Never think that the father looked upon his son as a loathsome spider. He did not. The father had nothing but love in his heart for his profligate son. As long as the son remained in the far country, the “wrath of God” abided upon him. But when he turned toward home and sought mercy, he was saved from “wrath” and found himself a sinner in the hands of a loving God.

Today my handmade copy of “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is stored safely away among other memorabilia. I’m no longer mining it for material to terrorize sinners. The monster god has faded away, and today I preach the beauty of God revealed in the face of Christ. But that doesn’t mean there are no monsters. The monsters of war, violence, greed, exploitation, oppression, racism, genocide, and every other form of antihuman abuse continue to inflict our species with unimaginable suffering. If we try to manipulate these monsters for our own self-interest, they eventually turn on us and destroy us. We can call this the wrath of God. But the hands of God are not actually hurling thunderbolts from heaven like Zeus of the Greek pantheon. The hands of God have been stretched out in love where they were nailed to a tree. The nail-pierced hands of God now reach out to every doubter and every sufferer, revealing the wounds of love. The hands of God are not hands of wrath but hands of mercy. To be a sinner in these hands is where the healing begins.

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