

God's Love, Judgment, and Salvation

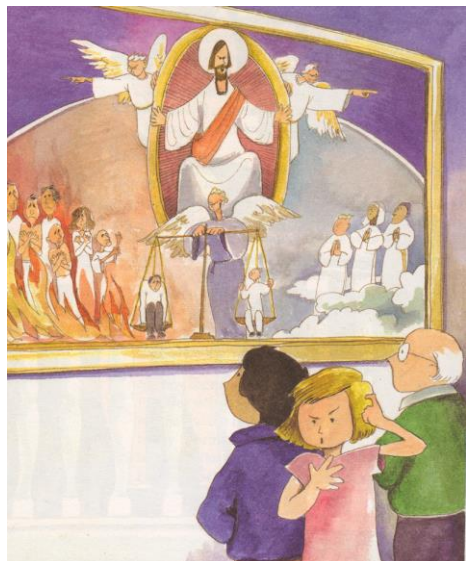


Illustration by Francisco Miranda in *Good Goats: Healing Our Image of God*

How we understand God matters. What we've been taught about God's judgment and salvation affects our experience of God and influences our formation.

In his book *The God-Shaped Brain*, psychiatrist Timothy Jennings relates a children's story that haunted him for years after he heard it in church as a child. The storyteller began by sharing about a little boy who stole a cookie. Then someone dressed like an angel appeared before the children, holding a clipboard and pen. As the storyteller described various wrongs—talking back to mommy, fighting over a toy, or making an ugly face—the angel dutifully wrote each of the wrongs on

the clipboard. In much the same way, Jennings notes,

We were told that God sends his recording angels to follow us everywhere we go and faithfully write down every sin we commit in heaven's record books. Only by confessing our sins and asking Jesus to forgive could the sins be erased from those heavenly ledgers. If we didn't ask Jesus to forgive, our sins would remain in the books and, at judgment, when God saw them, he would punish [us in hell].

Jennings continues:

I experienced so many restless nights, so many nightmares because of that story. Most alarming of all, I found myself afraid of God. I worried I might forget to confess a sin and not get it erased. . . . I didn't feel God's love as much as I felt his scrutiny. I didn't want to make mistakes, so I worked hard to do everything right. I paid my tithe, read my Bible, prayed three times a day. . . . But I didn't have peace. All my actions were based on fear of punishment, not love for God and human beings, for love does not flow where lies about God are retained."¹

Florence Nightingale—nursing pioneer, spiritual mystic, and social reformer—railed against preachers who focused on God's judgment and hell to scare people into becoming Christians and who made salvation a matter of the afterlife rather than this life. She wrote:

I can't love because I am ordered—least of all can I love One who seems only to make me miserable here to torture me hereafter. Show me that [God] is good, that He is loveable, and I shall love Him without being told.

But does any preacher show this? He may *say* that God is good, but he shows Him to be very bad. He may say that God is "Love," but he shows him to be *bate*."²

I believe God's love is unconditional, universal, and unceasing. I believe all people are God's beloved children and that God's boundless love reaches to all people of all faiths around the world throughout the universe for all eternity.

But how do we reconcile this love and the promise of salvation with the threat of hell connected to God's judgment?

I challenge the dominant teaching about judgment and make a case for God's loving intention for universal salvation. I reject the image of God as a judge damning masses of people to hell forever, because I believe that view is a distortion of God and a stumbling block for people. Florence Nightingale asked, "If God punishes me for doing evil by doing me evil, how is God better than I?" Tough question.

When it comes to traditional teaching about God's judgment, people wonder . . .

- How can a loving God send most of humankind to hell to suffer endless torment?
- Where's the justice of being sentenced to hell forever for committing sin or not confessing Christ in this limited life?
- Doesn't such judgment amount to violent retribution, excessive use of force, or abuse of power?
- How can God expect us to love our enemies if God's approach to enemies is to torture or annihilate them in hell?

How do we answer these difficult questions?

Some people simply state that there is no hell—that this is a primitive feature of an old cosmology we no longer hold. This may be true and that God was simply working within belief systems of the time. Other people focus on the Bible's presentation of hell as a form of dreadful separation from God. This still, however, leaves the challenge of reconciling God's judgment with God's love.

In response, we can say that God doesn't send anyone to hell—that we place ourselves in hells of our own making. We can also say that God's saving love reaches even into hell after death, giving people endless opportunities for eternal life to bring about what Peter proclaims as "universal restoration" (Acts 3:21) when God's plan to "unite all things" is accomplished (Eph 1:9–10).

But if God is truly like a loving Parent, as Hosea and Jesus describe, wouldn't God do everything possible to save us from the hell of our own making and

instead lead us into an eternal life of love? If God’s grace discontinues for those lost in hell, wouldn’t that contradict God’s unconditional, steadfast love?

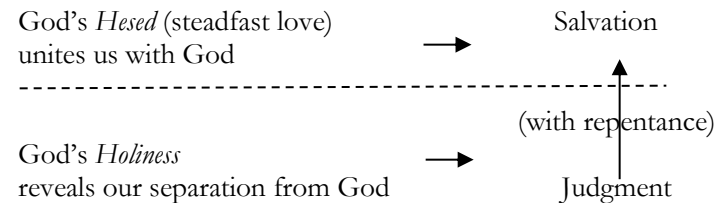
The common view of God sending people to hell forever misrepresents God’s love and judgment. But if we want to take scripture seriously, we have some explaining to do to reconcile God’s judgment and salvation. In ten points, here’s how this can be addressed.

1. God is love, desires that all live in this love, and wills the salvation of *all* people. Where there’s a will there’s a way that God will accomplish this ultimate intention. (1 Jn 4:18–19; Eph 1:5; Jn 3:16–21, 10:10, 16, 17:2–3; Lk 15:1–32; 1 Tm 2:3–6; 1 Thes 4:9; 2 Pt 3:9)
2. While there’s the promise of salvation (loving union with God), there’s also the reality of hell (dreadful separation from God). Because people are free, they may reject God and live against the way of God. As such, people come under judgment and into hell. This, like salvation, begins in the present, not just after death. (Mt 13:24–30, 36–43, 47–50; 22:1–14; 25:1–13, 31–43; Lk 16:19–31; Jn 3:16–17; Rom 2:2–11; 2 Thes 1:5–10; Heb 10:26–27)
3. Judgment texts must be read in the total context of scripture and in light of Jesus the Christ who reveals a God of salvation, not damnation. These texts are not future predictions but prophetic warnings of what will happen at the end of the world. They assert this urgent message: Don’t let this happen to you! Living against God’s ways has severe consequences.
4. Hell and judgment texts employ two literary devices:
 - (1) *Hyperbole*. Like when loving parents make exaggerated threats to warn their children. Or when Jesus speaks of cutting off one’s hand to avoid sin.
 - (2) *Metaphor*. Billy Graham taught that descriptions of hell were symbolic and that hell means separation from God.³ Hell is described in terms of
 - “fire”— the burning pain of one’s sins being exposed to God’s holy light, with the intent for purification rather than destruction, and
 - “darkness”—tormenting despair in separation from God.
 The images of fire and darkness (originating with the city dump in Jerusalem’s Valley of Hinnon) are figurative or symbolic for the agony and alienation of hell, for how can there be both literal fire and literal darkness in hell? As Jesus demonstrated with the woman caught in adultery, taking judgment texts too literally can cause serious distortions of God’s intent. (Mt 5:29–30, 18:8–9, 8:12, 22:13, 25:30; Jn 8:2–11)
5. The New Testament use of “eternal” (*aiōnios*) has a qualitative more than a temporal sense. Just as “eternal” life means *heavenly*—not *perpetual*—life,

“eternal fire” means to convey the dreadful state rather than length of hell. What about the “fear of God”? The Bible’s call is to “revere” not “fear” God. Repeatedly in divine encounters the invitation is to “fear not”—i.e., don’t be afraid of God. Notice the movement from fear of God in the wilderness, to reverence for God in wisdom literature, to love that “casts out fear” as proclaimed by Jesus’s beloved disciple, John. (Rom 8:14–16; Ex 20:18–20; Pv 1:7; Ps 67, 86, 111; 1 Jn 4:16–19)

6. Judgment is not the end. Rather, like the Law, it is a “disciplinarian” to turn people from sin to God, with the aim of salvation. God’s judgment is corrective and redemptive, not vindictive and punitive as with human retribution. Even hell is remedial and meant to turn people to God. God’s judgment is like the discipline of a loving parent—done out of love, even with anger, intent on reforming behavior and restoring relationship.

God’s judgment is a means to God’s salvation



(Rom 3:19–20, 7:7; Gal 3:19–25; 1 Cor 11:32; Rev 9:20, 11:13, 16:9–11)

7. God’s nature is not to be confused with human notions (the common error of anthropomorphism). God’s justice is higher and God’s grace is greater than human ways. We may well wonder if some vengeance motifs owe more to our human need for retribution than to the actual way of God. (Ps 7:12–13; Is 55:6–9; Mt 20:1–16)
8. God’s holiness and human sin are in tension in the biblical story. While this tension is never fully resolved in this life, God’s steadfast love (*hesed*) prevails, as illustrated in the Old Testament cycles of judgment and restoration. (Ex 34:6; Num 14:18; Neh 9:17ff; Ps 103:8–14, 145:8–9; Is 49:15; Hos 5:8–6:6, 11:1–12; Jon 4:2)
9. God’s endless, unrelenting love won’t allow people to remain in hell with no chance after death for salvation. God’s saving grace reaches the lost not only in life but even in death. Witness Jesus’s intervention in hell. When he descended into hell to deliver those held in darkness, he demonstrated God’s unwillingness to abandon people to their destructive choices and that

God's grace reaches even into hell. People remain in hell only as long as they choose to. At the end of Revelation, we see the gates of the City are never closed but always open. (Eph 4:9–10; 1 Pt 3:19–20, 4:6)

10. While some scriptures imply limited salvation where some people persist in their rejection of God, others claim universal salvation where God's grace prevails, redeeming all people from hell and bringing about "universal restoration." Taken together, it is not that all will certainly be saved but that all *may* be saved by God's love. (Jn 12:32; Acts 3:21; Rom 11:32; 1 Cor 15:22–28; 1 Pt 3:19–20, 4:6; Eph 1:10, 4:9–10; Phil 2:9–11; Col 1:19–20; 1 Tm 4:10)

That people will forever refuse God's saving love in hell, Karl Barth called an "impossible possibility."⁴ To priests in the Inquisition, Teresa of Avila confessed, "Oh, I believe there is a hell," but then reportedly whispered to a nun nearby, "It's just that no one is there!"⁵

Like early church leaders Basil the Great and Origen, Hans Denck—a sixteenth-century Anabaptist mystic—claimed that all God's punishments and hell are for bringing about lasting salvation for all people.⁶ Denck and other Anabaptists believed in this view of postmortem salvation, where in hell people receive God's love and are saved. Enough believed in this that the Lutherans persecuted Anabaptists on this point. Article 17 of Augsburg Confession written in 1530 states, "We condemn the Anabaptists who think that the punishment of demons and those people whom God condemns will not last forever."

In response to this condemnation, we refer to the claim that John the beloved elder made: "God is love. . . . Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment. . . . There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love" (1 Jn 4:16–18). Abba Anthony, father of ancient monasticism, knew this truth and said, "I no longer fear God" but live in love.⁷

And we may sing "There's a wideness in God's mercy" from the hymnal *Voices Together* (156):⁸

There's a wideness in God's mercy,
like the wideness of the sea.
There's a kindness in God's justice,
which is more than liberty.

But we make God's love too narrow
by false limits of our own,
and we magnify its strictness
with a zeal God will not own.

For the love of God is broader
than the measures of the mind,
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.

Recommended Resources

- Brian Zahnd, *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God: The Scandalous Truth of the Very Good News* (Waterbrook, 2017).
- David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (Yale University Press, 2012).
- Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn, *Good Goats: Healing Our Image of God* (Paulist, 1994).
- Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist* (Cascade, 2012).
- John A. T. Robinson, *In the End God . . . : A Study of the Christian Doctrine of the Last Things*, edited by Robin Parry (Cascade, 2011).
- Thomas Talbot, *The Inescapable Love of God* (Universal, 1999).

—Steve Thomas, 2022

¹ Timothy Jennings, *The God-Shaped Brain: How Changing Your View of God Transforms Your Life*, (IVP, 2017), 147.

² Florence Nightingale, *Freethought Review* 1, no. 3 (December 1, 1883): 14.

³ Billy Graham, *Peace with God: The Secret of Happiness* (Thomas Nelson, 2000).

⁴ Karl Barth, "God the Father and Lord of His Creature" in *Church Dogmatics*, 3.3:85–86.

⁵ Richard Rohr, "Universal Restoration," Daily Meditation, Fathers of the Eastern Church, May 14, 2015, <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation--Universal-Restoration.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=rKXXVXTTfnjg>.

⁶ Morwenna Ludlow, "Why Was Hans Denck Thought to Be a Universalist?," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 55, no. 2 (April 2004): 257–74, published online by Cambridge University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204690400990X>. See also Andrew Loran Raines, "The Word of God in the Hearts of All Men": Hans Denck and Anabaptist Universalism (honors thesis, Duke University, 2021), <https://hdl.handle.net/10161/24947>.

⁷ Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Liturgical, 1984).

⁸ Verses 1, 3, 4 in Bradley Kauffman et al., eds., *Voices Together* (MennoMedia, 2020), 156.