

Seeing God as he really is

Part 1 - What do we make of Jesus condemning people to Hell?

As our world heads into ever more trouble, and possibly the worst trouble yet in our lifetimes, we could be faced with a problem as Christians, because as suffering increases so could people's anger against God increase too, and who will people most likely vent their anger on? On Christians.

We've already seen it happening in the anger expressed against Christianity in best-selling books by Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), Christopher Hitchens (*God is not great*) and Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*, and *Letter to a Christian nation*). That anger has spilled out publicly in other ways too, in advertisements on buses stating "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life," and on posters in subway stations stating "You can be good without God."

People are openly stating they're fed-up with God and they're taking it out on Christians, which is understandable, because you can't hit God but you can hit a Christian. But aren't Christians asking to be hit?! It was Christian posters on London buses pointing people to a website that said, "[You will be condemned to everlasting separation from God and then you spend all eternity in torment in hell](#)" that got atheists and humanists all fired up to fight back with their own posters, and who can blame them? Top of the list and first choice for Christians when portraying their picture of God is a God who's angry.

One wonders what Christians are hoping to accomplish by that - and especially in tough times when people are more likely to be looking to God for help and comfort. Shouldn't Christians be more sensitive to the times and emphasize the loving God who meets us in our need, sees our suffering and suffers with us? But what are Christians doing instead? They're telling people God is angry, he's punishing us, and humanity is only getting what it deserves.

So, where do Christians get this picture of God that justifies, they believe, placing posters on buses leading to a website that threatens people with spending all eternity in Hell? Well, there's no denying the fact they get it from the Bible, and they have a huge choice of scriptures to choose from, like:

Matthew 25:41, 46 - where Jesus talks bluntly about eternal hellfire and punishment,

John 3:18 - where Jesus also talks about people being

condemned already for not believing in him, and -
John 3:36 - where John the Baptist talks about God's wrath
remaining on people who reject Jesus.

Can Christians be blamed, then, for preaching these scriptures? Certainly not for quoting them, no - but yes, when they take them out of context. To hit people with a website that talks only of Hell and does not include the context, gives a lop-sided view of God.

The context in **John 3:18** and **36**, for instance, isn't primarily about Hell, it's primarily about Jesus, and Jesus being the key to our eternal life. Three times that's mentioned in this chapter. In **verse 15**, "everyone who believes in him may have eternal life," in **verse 16**, "whoever believes in him shall not perish," and in **verse 36**, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life." Add to that **verse 17**, too, which states that God did not send Jesus into our world to condemn it, but rather to save it.

The context of those verses is clear. It's about God loving us so much, **verse 16**, that he sent his Son to save the entire world. It's a marvellous picture of God's intense love for us, which Jesus backs up with some hard evidence as well, having seen and heard God personally, **verse 32**. The primary emphasis in these verses clearly isn't on Hell, it's on God loving us, and on God not wanting anyone to miss out on eternal life, and on God sending his Son to save us, not judge us. It's about believing in Jesus Christ through whom a loving God has given us eternal life.

On the other hand, doesn't Jesus also say in **verse 18** that "whoever does not believe (in him) stands condemned already," and in **verse 36** that "whoever rejects the Son will not see (eternal) life, for God's wrath remains on him?" Isn't God about anger and condemnation as well, then? Yes, he is. In the same chapter, therefore we have two pictures of God. He's not only love, he also gets extremely angry. To properly picture God, therefore, we have to include this other side of him. But how can God be angry and loving at the same time? And which of the two (love or anger) should Christians be emphasizing most?

For the Christians sponsoring the ads on the buses, the answer leans heavily toward God's anger. For other Christians, however, the gospel is primarily the good news about God's love. And, ironically, both sets of Christians find support for their respective views of God from the same book and chapter!

But if both views of God can be found in John 3, then both views must be true, right? And both views must be included to get a proper picture of God. But how do you do that? How do you place a God who gets passionately angry with us beside a God who passionately loves us? No wonder Christians tend to lean one way or the other, because it's difficult putting both pictures of God together.

There is a single link, though, that connects his love and anger. It's in **verse 36**. "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life." The link is the Son, or Jesus, and whether we humans believe in him or reject him. God's love and God's anger revolve totally around that.

It's in sending Jesus to save us, for instance, that God expresses his passionate love for us. And when we see that, accept it and believe it, God is enormously pleased - so pleased, in fact, that he says through John the Baptist, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life." Notice that? "*HAS* eternal life." Eternal life is ours already!

But that's how important and wonderful it is to God when a human being sees his love as he expresses it through his Son, because there is no greater expression of his love. Jesus was it. Sending Jesus was God's greatest act of love. What more could God have done to prove his love for us? Surely, it would make his love for us so obvious and it would prove to us so completely and totally that we're loved, because everything we would ever need to be blissfully happy for eternity he would provide for us through Jesus' sacrifice. It would totally remove the penalty for all human sin, it would take away all guilt, all fear of judgment, all worries about God being out to get us, and it would fling the gates open to eternity to frail, fallible, finite human beings for nothing more being asked of them than believing it was all true.

"Therefore, there is now no more condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (**Romans 8:1**)." That's how passionately God loves us for accepting his Son's sacrifice and the love behind it. And it tells us something wonderful about God, too, that everything for God hinges round his Son, and when we respect his Son, it means everything to him. We have this wonderful, intimate picture of God, then, in John 3, in the passionate love he has for his Son, and the passionate love he has for us for loving his Son, too.

But isn't John 3 about God's anger, as well? Yes it is, and Jesus explains why. "This is the verdict," he says in **verse 19**, "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." And in **verses 32-33**, "He (Jesus) testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. The man who has accepted it (on the other hand) has certified that God is truthful." In other words, when people reject the clear evidence of God's love, shown and expressed through Jesus, they're calling God a liar. But the reason they're calling God a liar isn't legitimate, it's only because "evil hates the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed (**verse 20**)."

They don't have any legitimate reason for rejecting God, it's just that God gets in the way of what they want to do, so they find excuse to reject him. We have atheists doing exactly that right now, using the wrongs of Christianity to justify rejecting God. Teenagers do the same thing with their parents, too. They come up with all kinds of excuses for rejecting their parents because they don't want

their parents discovering what they're up to. Parents mess things up. Parents show them what's wrong with what they're doing, so they stay out of their parents' way "for fear that (their) deeds will be exposed."

And that's infuriating, as well as heartbreaking, for the parents, because they love their child dearly but their child clearly shows he doesn't believe it, or doesn't want to believe it, so that he can justify doing whatever he wants. And how do parents feel when that happens? Their passions are inflamed! They're intensely angry. They've given their children all the evidence in the world that they're loved; they've sacrificed time and money, allowed the child as much freedom as possible, encouraged him all the way, and never made him feel small or inadequate. They made their love as obvious as possible, just like God made his love as obvious as he possibly could in the sacrifice of Christ - and what does their child do? He rejects their love.

It's very easy to hate a child when this happens, because the passions parents feel at this point are shattering. How could their child do such a thing? They loved him so much and this is what he does? Why, when there's no excuse whatsoever for the child's rejection?

It's a horrible time for a parent because the anger he feels is so intense it consumes him. He can't concentrate, he dreads coming home, and he hates even seeing the child, let alone talking to him. And nothing in the world can calm the parent's anger, either. It does not diminish one bit while the child remains stubborn. Neither does God's anger diminish one bit for someone who rejects his Son. He "[will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.](#)"

When clear and obvious love is rejected, it not only hurts, it creates a fury as equal in passion as the love, because both passions course through the same veins, inseparable. Wherever there is great love, there is always great anger when the love is rejected. Ask any boy or girl who's been jilted, or any husband or wife whose mate deserts them for someone else. Their anger and bitterness knows no bounds. They would have no trouble throwing the offending person into Hell. "May you rot in Hell" is a familiar phrase in movies, but it describes exactly the passions felt when love is rejected. God's passions, too.

I can understand why a parent could reach the point of saying to his beloved child, "Go to hell," because that's exactly what Jesus says in **Matthew 25:41-46** to those who rejected him. I can also understand a parent turning a cold shoulder on his child, and refusing to even talk to him, because "[whoever does not believe stands condemned already \(John 3:18\).](#)" When a child rejects his parents' love, he's condemned himself already to a life without their love. That's the risk a child takes when he knows he's loved but rejects it. It's also the risk we humans take with God, because we stand condemned already to a life without his love if we reject the obvious love he showed us through his Son. God says, just like a parent does, "You made your bed, you lie in it."

There is instant forgiveness on repentance, of course, as we know from the story of the Prodigal Son, because God's love, just like a parent's love, never diminishes either. But God made us very much like himself, with this volatile mixture of love and anger, both of which course through our veins (and his) as inseparable companions. What stirs one or the other to burst beyond its banks to consume God's heart toward us is our response to his love expressed in his Son. That's the trigger. Respect the obvious love God expressed in the sacrifice of his Son and we live in his love for eternity, but reject his obvious love and we've condemned ourselves already to a life of his constant anger.

And in seeking to see God as he really is, it has to include this picture of God in both his anger and his love, because they're both included in scripture. But to see God this way tells us something very intimate about God, that he's a God of deep passions, just as we are. When he loves, he really loves, and when he's angry, he's really angry. But it's what these passions of his are stirred by that fills the picture with vibrant colour. It's us. It's his Son. It's the deep feelings he felt when sending his Son to us, and the deep feelings he feels when we respond to his Son. This is what God is about. He loves us so much in sending his Son to us that it stirs him wonderfully to see us accept him, but it also stirs him terribly to see us reject him.

Are Christians right, then, in posting ads on buses directing people to a website that talks of God condemning us to everlasting separation? Yes, they are, because it expresses God's anger exactly. But if that's the only picture of God they give people, it's horribly lop-sided because it doesn't mention why God is so angry. What they neglect to mention is what stirs God's anger - it's feeble human excuses for rejecting his obvious love for us, that he so clearly expresses through the Son he so dearly loves, too.

His anger, then, is really stirred by his love, just as a caring parent's anger is stirred by love. And the anger caused by rejected love may be just what's needed to wake a person up, too. When a child, for instance, does not respond to his parent's love, it's their anger that may reach him, instead. It can really shock a child when his loving parents turn their backs on him. How could they do that, the teenager asks? Well, it's the same question people ask of a loving God who expresses his intense anger in scripture, but hopefully it dawns on people, just as it dawns on a teenager, that anger is a sure sign that all is not well, and it's high time to find out why.

Behind God's anger, there is love, always love. God's love never diminishes, the proof of which is his forgiveness and the clear sense of his love flowing into us when we respond to his Son.

So, Christians aren't wrong in expressing God's anger, but top of the list and first choice for Christians when portraying their picture of God is not a God of anger, it's a God of love, because even his anger is stirred by love, too.

Part 2 - God in the Old Testament; another confusing picture!

In Part 1, the question was: How can a loving God be angry - and so angry that Jesus said, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels (**Matthew 24:41**)?"

This time, in Part 2, the question is: How could a loving God cause all that mayhem and destruction in the Old Testament? A few examples:

Deuteronomy 7:1-2, 16, 20 - "When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations...and when the Lord your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally...You must destroy all the peoples the Lord your God gives over to you. Do not look on them with pity...Moreover, the Lord your God will send the hornet among them until even the survivors who hide from you have perished."

Deuteronomy 20:13, 16 - "When the Lord your God delivers it (a city) into your hand, put to the sword all the men in it...do not leave anything alive that breathes."

Joshua 6:21 - "They devoted the city (Jericho) to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it - men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys."

1 Samuel 15:2-3 - "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel...Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.'"

And think of all the women, children and babies God destroyed in The Flood, in the terrible plagues on Egypt, in the wars God directed the Israelites to wage against their neighbours, and in the multiple thousands of Israelites killed for their disobedience.

Then there's **1 Chronicles 21:14**, when Satan stirred David to count how many fighting men he could muster, in response to which "the Lord sent a plague on Israel and seventy thousand men of Israel fell dead." And what about poor Job? God clearly said Job was a good man, but he allowed Satan to kill all Job's children, all his servants, and either kill or steal his livestock.

Atheists, of course, jump at these scriptures to justify rejecting God. To Richard Dawkins, for instance, author of The God Delusion, "The God of the Old

Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty, ethnic cleanser; a misogynist (woman-hater), homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal (obsessed with his own greatness), sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”

But isn't this exactly the picture of God that emerges from the Old Testament? It certainly was to a man who phoned me a while back and for the next hour listed all the awful things God did in the Old Testament - in chronological order, too - finishing it off with “And that's why I don't believe in your God!”

[There's another side to God in the Old Testament](#), however, that's the complete opposite to the picture this man and Dawkins have of him. For example:

Exodus 34:5-7 - “Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him (Moses) and proclaimed his name, ‘the Lord.’ And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”

Numbers 14:19 - “In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.”

Deuteronomy 7:6-8 - “The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples...it was because the Lord loved you.”

Jeremiah 31:3 - “I have loved you (Israel) with an everlasting love.”

Ezekiel 18:32 - “For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!”

And those who repented **did** live, like the Ninevites who listened to Jonah, and like king Ahab who listened to Elijah. But when do atheists ever talk of Nineveh and Ahab?

It's not surprising they don't because the story of Ahab reveals a very different view of God. In **1 Kings 21**, Ahab wants Naboth's vineyard for a vegetable garden, and he offers a better vineyard in exchange, but Naboth refuses because the vineyard is part of his family inheritance. Ahab gets angry, sulks and refuses to eat. His delightful wife, Jezebel, cooks up a plot to have Naboth accused of cursing God, and Naboth is stoned to death. Ahab doesn't ask how Naboth is suddenly dead, he just trots off down to take over Naboth's vineyard.

At which point, God gets involved. He tells Elijah (**verse 10**) to meet Ahab in the vineyard and say “Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?” - which Elijah does - but before Ahab can answer, Elijah jumps in with “This is what the Lord says: ‘In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood - yes, yours!’”

And that's not all God says; it gets worse (**verse 21**): "I am going to bring disaster on you. I will consume your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel...Dogs will eat those belonging to Ahab who die in the city, and the birds of the air will feed on those who die in the country." This includes his wife, Jezebel. Dogs are going to eat her, too.

God is obviously extremely angry, but (we discover in brackets in **verse 25**) - "There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, urged on by Jezebel his wife." In other words, Naboth's brutal murder was typical of Ahab and Jezebel, both of whom, long ago, had set their minds on doing whatever vile acts they wanted - and they thumbed their noses at God while doing them, too.

But shock and surprise (**verse 27**), "When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly." Ahab the Vile repented! And further shock and surprise (**verse 29**), God tells Elijah, "Because Ahab has humbled himself, I will not bring disaster in his day."

For years (**verse 26**) Ahab had "behaved in the vilest manner," provoking God to anger and causing the whole nation of Israel to sin (**verse 22**), and now an innocent man had been murdered to meet Ahab's wish for a vegetable garden close to the palace. But when Ahab shows obvious signs of remorse, God spares him.

And where Ahab was the nastiest man of his generation, Nineveh was the cruelest, vilest city of its generation, too. Its arrogance and violence knew no bounds. On a stone pillar found in its ruins was this statement from one of its rulers: "3,000 captives I burned with fire. I left not one hostage alive. I cut off the hands and feet of some. I cut off noses, ears and fingers off others. The eyes of numerous soldiers I put out. Maidens I burned as a holocaust."

The evidence of Nineveh's brutality was so great that TV specials made of the city's discovery by archaeologists had to be filtered for public consumption. Imagine a child hearing that Ninevites would slowly impale their victims by sliding them down sharp poles, or that they made handbags from their victims' skins.

"But," God told Jonah (**4:11**), "Nineveh has more than a 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" Despite the horrific things going on in Nineveh, God was touched by their ignorance. He even had concern for their animals. So, did God at any point stop loving the Ninevites because of their atrocious behaviour? No, he gave them a chance to repent, just as he did to Ahab.

And just like Ahab, the king of Nineveh listened, too (**3:8-9**). He declared a city-wide fast and issued this proclamation: “Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish,” which is exactly what God did (**verse 10**).

So, that’s two stories that tell of God’s amazing patience - and they’re nothing like Richard Dawkins’ view of God as violent, vengeful and bloodthirsty. There are clearly two pictures of God, then, that emerge from the Old Testament: the God of great anger, yes, but the God of great mercy, too.

The question now is: How do you put both pictures of God together? How can a merciful, compassionate God who spared Ahab and Nineveh, be so ruthless and cruel with Jericho and the Amalekites?

Nineveh provides a clue, because both sides of God emerge in his dealings with the Ninevites. In the book of Jonah, for instance, God is extremely merciful with them, but in the book of Nahum, he is extremely angry. So in Nineveh we have the God of anger and the God of mercy both showing up in the same city.

But why, on one occasion, would God be so forgiving, and on another, be so angry? Is there a link between the two that explains why God would act so differently? Yes. On both occasions, it’s the response of the people to God’s love that determines his response in return.

There’s an order of events here that brings out this point so clearly. First off the mark is God: In an act of supreme mercy on his part, he sends Jonah to severely warn the city to mend its evil ways, or else. And what did the Ninevites do? They responded to God’s love. Result? God was merciful, and he did no violence to them at all. In other words, it was the response of the people to God’s obvious act of love, that determined his response in return. And on this occasion the people repented, and in return God was merciful.

It was a remarkable incident involving a massive display of God’s mercy and huge, open-hearted repentance by the worst city in existence, and it should’ve gone down in their history books forever, with a day set aside every year to remember and celebrate the amazing love of God. It’s certainly a story remembered in the Bible - but it wasn’t remembered in Nineveh, unfortunately, and before long the Ninevites were right back to their brutal, barbaric ways.

What made that so awful, and made God so angry, was that God had extended enormous kindness to the one city that least deserved it. His love for them couldn’t have been more obvious, not only in warning them but in instantly respecting their repentance, too. But the Ninevites somehow found excuse to put that memory aside and go back to their barbarism and cruelty. And for that, they brought on themselves God’s intense anger. “I will pelt you with filth,” God says

through Nahum (3:6-7), “I will treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle. All who see you will flee from you and say, ‘Nineveh is in ruins - who will mourn for her?’”

In 612 B.C., and without any warning from a Jonah this time, a combined army of Babylonians, Medes and Scythians laid siege to Nineveh and totally destroyed it. In the words of one archaeologist, speaking about what he found in the ruins of Nineveh, “I’ve never seen anything like this mass of tangled bodies with weapons in the midst of them. The desperation of the defense is now manifest.” The fate Nineveh deserved that did not fall on them in Jonah’s time, had now fallen on them in Nahum’s time. It was utter and appalling destruction.

And what decided the difference in how God dealt with them? The response of the people to his love. “The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble,” Nahum writes in **Nahum 1:7**, “He cares for those who trust in him,” and God had proved that point beyond all doubt in sparing Nineveh its well-deserved destruction in Jonah’s day. But the Ninevites turned their backs on the memory of God’s love, so “with an overwhelming flood he (God) will make an end of Nineveh.” Reject God’s love? Then expect his anger.

In other words, God is exactly the same in the Old Testament as he is in the New. It’s the rejection of his love, clearly demonstrated through the life and death of Jesus Christ, that brings on God’s wrath in the New Testament (see Part 1). And now we see in the Old Testament the same thing happening, that it’s the rejection of God’s love that eventually brought a grisly end to Nineveh.

The lesson in both Testaments is clear. God’s patience is immense, as is his compassion, but when his love is treated with disdain and contempt by those who’ve had his love clearly demonstrated to them, his patience and compassion eventually give way to a terrible anger.

It’s the same with parents. When their clear and obvious love for their child is met with constant defiance, it makes them very angry. And what a shock for the child, when his parents’ mood turns to ugly, privileges are removed, curfews are enforced, the atmosphere at home turns to ice, and he may even find himself on the street. But how can this be, he asks himself? One minute his parents are bending over backwards to show their love for him, but the next they’re yelling at him and chucking him out.

Why the sudden difference in his parents’ attitude toward him? Because of his continued defiant attitude toward them. For years they’ve loved him, and the proof of their love is obvious. They’ve forgiven him again and again for his rotten attitudes and arrogance, taken him places they didn’t want to take him, put up with his mess, and ignored the lies he’s told to his friends about them. There comes a point, though, when a parent says, “enough is enough,” because the

child is obviously just using their love to get away with doing whatever his defiant little mind desires.

So, what he needs to learn now, for his own sake, is that love defiantly rejected creates great anger. You can't reject love forever without creating anger, and if you think you can, son, then read the Old Testament, because [even God, the great God of never-ending and supreme love, doesn't take rejection of his love forever](#), either.

A defiant child needs to experience the anger that rejection of love creates. It may be what wakes him up. And isn't that the reason all these horrific stories of God's anger have been preserved for us in the Old Testament? They're all wake-up calls as to what happens when God's love for us humans is constantly and defiantly rejected. But so are the other stories too, of what happens when the most evil people in the world respond to God's love and repent.

And Nineveh is such a perfect example of both. It's a massive lesson, preserved in its poignant perfection for all people for all time, that when the Ninevites responded to God's love, God spared them, but when they turned their backs on God's love, his anger was terrifying.

When an atheist says, therefore, that God was nothing but a "capriciously malevolent bully" in the Old Testament, I have but one word in return for him: [Nineveh](#).

Because how can God be called a malevolent bully when he spared the worst city in existence? And what about king Ahab? Both examples are clear and startling displays of God's immense patience. So are atheists! Because here they are, blatantly using the Old Testament to prove God is a bully - while totally ignoring the other side of God so prominently displayed in the same scriptures - and God lets them!

But take note, because in the same scriptures that atheists use against God, there is also a clear message that God doesn't put up with defiant rejection of his obvious love forever. And there's no clearer proof of God's love in the Old Testament than God's love for Nineveh. It's like the Cross in the New Testament. Nineveh and the Cross both demonstrate God's love for us, proving to us that God loves us even at our worst, and when we respond to his love, God responds in return by lifting off the penalties we deserve. He did it for the Ninevites who responded to Jonah, and he does it for those who respond to his Son today.

Nothing changes with God. He loves us, he demonstrates his love for us, and then he waits in his immense patience for our response. And if we reject the obvious proof of his love, God is still immensely patient, but we also learn from Nineveh that his patience eventually runs out and it can turn into terrible anger.

God is patient with defiant humans but only for so long, and that's the picture of God that emerges from the Old Testament. It's of a God of love and huge mercy with even the worst of people, but when people don't respond to his clear and obvious love, they risk his intense anger. They're two sides of the same coin, summarized for us by God himself in:

Exodus 34:6-7 - "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin."

That's one side of the coin. And now the other side -

"Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."

God never stops loving us, but "wickedness, rebellion and sin" do not go undealt with forever. God is patient, but even his patience has a limit. Or, put the other way round, God's patience has a limit, but how incredibly compassionate and merciful he is up to that limit. And in seeking to get a proper picture of God from the Old Testament, it's both these sides of him that he shows us.

But what's behind all the other grisly stories in the Old Testament, like the Flood, the wholesale destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the brutal wiping out of entire cities in Canaan by the Israelites, the command by God to eradicate the Amalekites, and the frequent killing of children?

Atheists still have all these grim stories to fall back on to prove their point that God is a malevolent bully, so what do we make of those stories, too?

Part 3 - God the baby killer; how can that be?

In Parts 1 and 2, the question was: How can these two pictures of God - the loving God and the angry God - be put together? In both Old and New Testaments it's the same problem, too; a God of great love appears beside a God of great anger.

Take Nineveh, for example (Part 2). In Jonah's day, God spares the city because he cares for people in it. But in Nahum's day, he utterly destroys it. Same God, same city, but completely opposite actions. How can God be so loving yet so angry with the same people?

In Part 3, the question is: How could a loving God cause the Flood, the wholesale destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the brutal wiping out of entire cities in Canaan by the Israelites, and order the eradication of the Amalekites - all of which included the killing of children? Take Jericho, for instance:

Joshua 6:21 - "They (the Israelites) destroyed with the sword every living thing in it (Jericho) - men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys." The same thing happened to the Amalekites, too:

1 Samuel 15:3 - "Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys."

But why would God, the great God of love, mercy and compassion, deliberately order the killing of Amalekite babies?

God gives his reasons. There's some history involved, and it takes a little digging, but there's a clue in **Romans 9:13** where God says, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated (for despising his birthright, Hebrews 12:16)." God's hatred of Esau is an important first clue because one of Esau's descendants was Amalek. God's displeasure with Esau, then, was passed on to the Amalekites, and we see how in **Malachi 1:2-3** - "Was not Esau Jacob's brother? the Lord says. 'Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.'"

So, where Israel got all God's blessings, the descendants of Esau got a wasteland with jackals for company. The Bible locates the Amalekites in the southern Negev desert (**Numbers 13:29**), in a large area stretching from the Dead Sea to the Red Sea, in today's Saudi Arabia. It was described by Mark Twain in 1867 as "a desolation that not even imagination can grace the pomp of life and action." It was a total wasteland, just as God promised.

It gave the Amalekites an intense hatred for anything Israelite. When news got to them, therefore, that Israel had finally managed to escape the Pharaoh's grip, and the Israelites were headed for Amalekite territory, the Amalekites took up arms and rushed to Rephidim.

But Rephidim was a long way away. It was at the north east end of the Red Sea, and at the far western tip of the Amalekite kingdom. So this was a deliberate march of some distance to attack the Israelites, not a haphazard wandering of millions of Israelites into their territory, requiring the Amalekites to forcefully defend themselves. No, this was the Amalekites grabbing the chance to attack their nemesis on their own turf.

Rephidim was the perfect spot too, because there was no water. When the Israelites arrived in Rephidim, they were already weak and parched from traveling through rugged country, but with no water they were in serious trouble, which, as usual, they blamed on Moses, **Exodus 17:1-4**.

The Amalekites watch all this going on but don't attack right away. They wait 'til after Moses strikes the rock to supply water (**verses 5-7**), and the Israelites have moved out of the hills into open ground, and they have nowhere to hide or escape to. That's when the Amalekites swoop into the attack - but not man to man at the front of the Israelite column - instead they pick off the stragglers at the back, bringing this scathing rebuke from God in **Deuteronomy 25:17-18** - "Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and cut off all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God."

And who were the people most likely lagging? The weak and the vulnerable, like the elderly and parents with young children and babies. Well, God was not amused, **verse 19**: "When the Lord our God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land he is giving you to possess as an inheritance, **you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!**"

The Israelites were never to forget this day, nor God's command to completely eradicate all sign and memory of Amalek. God then shows the Israelites what he has in mind for Amalek in the battle that follows. Moses is on top of a hill, viewing the skirmish with his arms raised, and when Aaron and Hur keep his arms raised the Israelites charge through the Amalekite ranks cutting them to ribbons (**Exodus 17:10-13**).

After what's left of the Amalekite army scampers off, God tells Moses in **verse 14**, "Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because **I will completely erase the memory of the Amalekites from under heaven.**"

So that's twice God says he wants the memory of Amalek erased forever, with a clear reminder to the Israelites, "Do not forget!" The Israelites then continue to the land of Canaan and enter it, leaving Amalekite territory behind. No Amalekite city or land is under threat now from the Israelites, because the Amalekites live outside the land God promised to Israel.

But what do the Amalekites do?

Given the chance to attack Israel again in **Judges 3:12-14**, they join forces with the Moabites and Ammonites, and reduce Israel to 18 years under Moabite rule. And in **Judges 6:3-6** "Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country. They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and **did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys.** They came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count the men and their camels; **they invaded the land to ravage it.**"

No crops? No livestock? And every year the Amalekites would do this? This was deliberate, vicious genocide through starvation. And who would that starvation have affected the most? Israelite children and babies. But it was like a sport every year to the Amalekites to charge into Israelite territory in the spring, hit every Israelite farm, wipe out its food supply for that year and leave the land utterly ravaged, without a crop or a cow in sight.

But what made this worse for the Amalekites was, they knew Israel was God's chosen nation, but did it make any difference? Not one bit. They had "[no fear of God](#)," **Deuteronomy 25:18**.

They certainly should've been fearful of God though, because it was clear that God's power was with the Israelites. They knew all about Israel's amazing escape from the mighty Egyptians and the crushing of Egypt's entire army in the Red Sea. "[The nations will hear and tremble](#)," was the song sung after the Red Sea (**Exodus 15:14**), but not the Amalekites! They didn't tremble at all at the might of God. They had the same complete disregard and disrespect for God as had Esau, whom they descended from.

No wonder God told Moses in **Exodus 17:15** "[The Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation](#)," because war was the only defence against such a vicious bunch of cutthroats who feared no one, including God. With people like them, it was either kill or be killed. They were the cold-hearted, brutal terrorists of their day, determined to cause mayhem at every opportunity, no matter who got caught in the crossfire, including children. Think Al Qaeda, think Amalekites, except the Amalekites were even worse because they were driven by an ingrained hatred for the people God had specifically chosen as his - and they knew they were his too, but that didn't scare them, either.

And for 400 years they didn't change. They never changed from the day they first attacked Israel at Rephidim: it was maim and kill God's people, especially the most vulnerable. Well, after 400 years of their constant opposition to God, their hatred of Israel and their cruelty to the weak, enough was enough, and in **1 Samuel 15:2** God announced "[I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt](#)."

[God had never forgotten that incident](#), because of its outrageous intent and tactics. The Amalekites had shown their true colours that day, and they were an ugly people indeed. And had their intent and tactics ever changed since? Not at all. It was time, therefore, to put an end to these bloodthirsty, genocidal maniacs, and the job was given to King Saul. His orders were clear: attack, destroy, and don't spare life or limb of either human or animal (**1 Samuel 15:3**).

But first, warning was given to the Kenites in the region to give them a chance to escape because "[you showed kindness to all the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt](#) (**verse 6**)."

They treated Israel completely differently, and after 400

years God hadn't forgotten what they did, either. Kindness or cruelty, God remembered both. It clearly matters to him a great deal how the weak and vulnerable are treated.

To the Amalekites it obviously didn't matter at all, so in went Saul with a huge force of 210,000 men. He swept the country from end to end (**verse 7**), sparing only Agag their king and the best of their animals.

God was not pleased with Saul, however, because he'd given specific instructions to Saul to "[completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; make war on them until you have wiped them out](#) (**verse 18**)."

But Saul had not wiped them out as instructed, and for his rebellion and arrogance (**verse 23**) God rejected him as king of Israel.

But why was God so angry that Agag was spared?

There's an answer to that in the book of Esther, and a man in that story called Haman, another vicious, genocidal killer. It was Haman's intent to eradicate all the Jews in the Persian Empire. Why? Because Queen Esther's Jewish uncle Mordecai refused to bow to Haman when he was made Prime Minister. Deeply miffed, Haman sees a chance to not only kill Mordecai but all the other Jews too, by extracting an irreversible decree out of the king to have all Jews killed.

He's very sneaky, too. "[If it pleases the king,](#)" Haman purrs in **Esther 3:8**, "[let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury.](#)" Money speaks and Haman knows it. So, **verse 13**, "[Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews - young and old, women and little children.](#)" It's not just "destroy," notice, it's "kill and annihilate," as well. It perfectly expresses Haman's utter hatred of the Jews - and note how the decree specifically includes "little children." What we've got in this Haman, then, is a genocidal maniac with an insane taste for hating and killing Jews, including their children.

Is it any surprise, then, to discover Haman was an Amalekite, and a direct descendant of king Agag (**Esther 8:5**)?! No wonder Haman wanted all Jews dead. Genocide for Jews was in his DNA. And how many hundreds of years have passed since Samuel killed Agag? But the Amalekites' tune hasn't changed one bit, because here's one of Agag's very own descendants proclaiming "death to all Jews."

[Did God know what he was talking about when he told Israel to never forget what the Amalekites were like, and to kill them all?](#) Yes, because if they didn't kill the Amalekites, the Amalekites would kill them - and if not in this generation, it would be in another generation, because the Amalekite hatred of Jews never ended. No

wonder God said kill their children too, because any child left alive would simply inherit this ghastly inborn hatred of Jews, just as Haman had.

Haman's plan backfires, however, because Esther gets the king's permission to allow the Jews to defend themselves, resulting in the death of all 10 of Haman's sons, and all 75,810 people in Persia who hated Jews, too (**Esther 9:5-17**).

It hardly seems a coincidence that Esther was from the house of Kish, the same house King Saul came from, whose job it was to wipe out the Amalekites in the first place. So, where Saul failed, God used a descendant of his to finish the job off, instead.

And the Jews from this point on took God's command "**Do not forget**" seriously. They created a special day to commemorate the victory of Esther over her Amalekite foe, called Purim. It's a day held in high esteem, with its fair share of hijinks too, with Haman being burnt in effigy, his name being written on the bottom of people's shoes, and hissing every time his name is mentioned! No, the Jews haven't forgotten.

And the Amalekites haven't been forgotten, either. Their story and their reputation has been kept alive all the way from Queen Esther's day until today, but this is how deeply the Amalekites have affected both the Jews and God. Why? Because the Amalekites had no fear of God, no respect whatsoever for his people, and not a shred of kindness for the weak and vulnerable. They exploited every occasion that came their way to maim, starve, humiliate and crush Israel. And despite God's amazing patience with them over 400 years, they never changed one iota. Hatred for Jews and disregard for God were imprinted on their brains like a tattoo.

Say then (as one person wrote), we were to "catapult the practices, the genocide and the barbarism of these cultures and peoples into the 21st century, and broadcast it around the world via TV News" would there not be "a global outcry for severe military action and punishment?" Well, of course there would be (think Nazi Germany and the holocaust) - so why do atheists react against God being angry when the Amalekites were guilty of the same practices, genocide and barbarism for 400 years?

Does it justify God ordering the killing of Amalekite babies? Yes, for two reasons: first of all, we know from the story of Haman what happens if Amalekite babies are allowed to live. They become maniacal, genocidal Jew-haters and killers of the weak and vulnerable. It's in their blood. From Rephidim to Esther every Amalekite baby was a potential Haman.

Secondly, God was only dealing out to the Amalekites what the Amalekites had always dealt out to Israel. The Amalekites didn't think twice about starving Jewish babies to death, or picking on the weak and vulnerable. They had no pity.

Atheists still use this story though, as reason to reject God. But dig into the history and we see God in this light, that first of all, [he's merciful](#) - witness the fact that he was angry with the Amalekites from the very first contact they had with Israel, but he let them live for centuries after that. Secondly, [he's just](#) - witness the fact the Amalekites got exactly what they deserved. God does not let evil continue forever. There comes a point at which his mercy turns into judgment, and evil is finally dealt with.

And thirdly, [we also see what God values](#), summarized rather coincidentally in **Esther 10:3**, the last verse in the book of Esther. Notice the stark contrast in Mordecai to the attitude of Haman and the Amalekites. - "[Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews.](#)"

Mordecai versus Haman, or Kenite versus Amalekite - both comparisons give us a wonderful insight into God and his very personal feelings as to what he loves and what he hates, and how they're both directly connected to our kindness, or lack of it, to the weak and vulnerable.

Does that sound like a vicious, cold-hearted God? Quite the opposite, and the story of the Amalekites could not be better proof of it!