

HATHQ Foundational Question # 3: What is God Like?

Question # 3 Deals with the Nature and Acts of God and is Framed in Three Questions

Question 1: *“If God is a good and loving God, why doesn’t He let everyone into heaven? Surely Jesus’s death on the cross was sufficient to cover the sins of all people everywhere! So why can’t He just relax a little and let us all in? Why must some remain in hell?”*

Question 2: *“I’ve heard it said that Jesus, God the Son, had to die to appease and satisfy an angry God the Father who was unwilling to forgive us. Is that so? If not, then ‘Why did Jesus have to die?’”*

Question 3: *“You say that God is loving and merciful. Yet, you also say that God has a vengeful intolerance and implacable wrath against sin and sinners. So, which is it? Is He loving and merciful or is He vengeful and full of wrath?”*

All good questions.

To answer them, and to better understand why God does what He does, we need to know a good deal more about Him and what He is like.

So, “What is God like?”

God has revealed to us in the Bible a great deal about Himself and what He is like. The Bible describes many of what are called His “attributes” or character traits for us.

The “*Attributes*” of God are the “*Characteristics or qualities of God that constitute God’s very being.*”

God’s attributes are either “*communicable*” or “*incommunicable*”

The Communicable Attributes of God are “*Those attributes of God considered to have corresponding characteristics in human beings.*”

The Incommunicable Attributes of God are “*Those attributes of God for which there is no corresponding attribute in humans – such as perfection, omnipotence, and omniscience.*”

[Note: All definitions in this section are taken from the Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms, Donald K. McKim, Westminster John Knox Press]

One attribute of God that has a great bearing on the answers to our three Questions is that of His immutability ...

“God, immutability of – God’s freedom from all change, understood to emphasize God’s changeless perfection and divine constancy.”

Other attributes of God that we will take a close look at in answering our three Questions are those of – love, mercy, justice, wrath.

[Note: For those of you who wish to delve more deeply into the various attributes of God we would recommend – Knowing God by J. I. Packer, IVP Books, 1973]

Section I – The Immutability of God

In seeking to learn more about God and His attributes, we can start with the rather surprising truth that ...

Even God has Limitations on What He Can Do

Though we may never have really thought about it, even God has limits on what He can do, and some of these limits have a direct bearing on the answers to our three Questions.

So, what are some of the things that God cannot do? Well ...

- 1. God cannot lie**
- 2. God cannot die**
- 3. God cannot perform “intrinsic impossibilities”.**

As C. S. Lewis says ...

“It remains true that all things are possible with God: the intrinsic impossibilities are not things but nonentities. It is no more possible for God than for the weakest of His creatures to carry out both of two mutually exclusive alternatives; not because His power meets an obstacle, but because

nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God.” (The Problem of Pain, page 28).

And so, God can perform all “*possible*” things, including miracles, but He cannot perform self-contradictory nonsense – i.e., *God cannot make a rock that is too big for Him to pick up.*

4. God cannot change in any way – He is Immutable.

The “immutability” of God is clearly set forth in the Bible ...

“For I am the Lord, I do not change” (Malachi 3:6)

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8)

“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.” (James 1:17).

“And God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’” (Exodus 3:14).

... thereby declaring His unchanging nature (i.e., His immutability) and proclaiming Himself to be Self-existent and defined only by Himself.

If you think about it, there are two very strong reasons why God *must* be immutable and could never go against Himself or deny His own inner character, for any reason ...

First, God cannot change in any way because all of His character traits and attributes are already at the highest level of perfection attainable. As stated above, God exists in a state of constant and changeless perfection. For God to change, amend, actively deny or go against any of His innate character traits or attributes would be to admit that that trait or attribute could somehow have been made better or improved upon.

Second, God cannot change in any way because all of His individual character traits and attributes are perfectly aligned and in complete and flawless harmony with each other. Just as a trait or attribute of God could not be made better, it is equally impossible that one trait or attribute of God could be the least bit at variance or out of perfect balance with any other attribute. God never has been and never will be internally conflicted or at cross purposes within Himself, which is why He cannot change in any way.

Because God is immutable, and cannot change in any way from what He is, He can never go against or deny His own nature and character, or act inconsistently with any of His own attributes.

**God's immutability is a key factor in understanding the answers
to our three Questions:**

Concerning Immutability and Question 1

“If God is a good and loving God, why doesn't He let everyone into heaven? Surely Jesus's death on the cross was sufficient to cover the sins of all people everywhere! So why can't He just relax a little and let us all in? Why must some remain in hell?”

God, being immutability Just, Holy, and Righteous, cannot let sin go unpunished.

Being a just, righteous and holy God, God by His very nature could never just overlook or “wink” at sin and ‘let us all into heaven in the end’. Do not be deceived on this point. Because God is just, righteous and a “consuming fire” of holiness, He always has, and always will, detest sin and cannot abide to have sin or sinners in His presence more than temporarily. God, by His very nature, must react to and punish sin. A penalty must be paid for every sin ever committed. A just, righteous, holy and good God cannot, and will not, let any amount or degree of sin go unpunished, because it would not be “righteous” or “good” or “just” to let sin go unpunished.

Additionally, because God is immutably Just, He cannot be lenient in punishing sin, for true Justice demands that the full measure for each sin be paid.

True justice requires that the punishment must be severe if severity is warranted. As the Apostle Paul says ...

“Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness” (Romans 11:22)

[Please refer to the HATHQ section of our website for a more full discussion of the Question “Is Hell Fair?”]

And so, we see that God, because of His immutable nature, must *fully punish* every sin and *cannot be lenient* in punishing it. Because God's inner core nature is Holy, Righteous, and Just, He is bound to express His wrath against sin and do so in full measure. He cannot do otherwise. This is why He cannot just “wink at” or overlook any part of any sin and let us all into heaven in the end.

Concerning Immutability and Question 2

“I’ve heard it said that Jesus, God the Son, had to die to appease and satisfy an angry God the Father who was unwilling to forgive us. Is that so? If not, then ‘Why did Jesus have to die?’”

We first need to understand that in regard to sin, the punishment of it, and the severity of it, there is no differentiation whatsoever between God the Father and God the Son.

For example, when our Lord Jesus Christ was speaking of Himself as “*the chief cornerstone*” at the end of the parable of the wicked vinedressers, He said ...

“Then He looked at them and said, ‘What then is this that is written:

*The stone which the builders rejected
Has become the chief cornerstone’?*

Whoever falls on that stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.” (Luke 20:17-18)

Being ‘ground to powder’ is not a light sentence.

Let us also note that Jesus Christ, God the Son, is the Judge and dispenser of Justice at the Last Judgment, and the one who will cast people into hell.

Again, there is NO differentiation of character attributes or traits between God the Father and God the Son. Both have exactly the same attribute of Justice and Wrath against sin.

But, just as God is a God of Justice and Wrath, He is at the same time also a God of Love and Mercy.

God the Father is very good, loving and merciful to repentant sinners.

BUT and this is very important, even in showing love and mercy to individual sinners, their sins are not in any way or measure overlooked or unpunished. No, God’s Justice and Wrath must still be fully satisfied. And so it was. The *full* penalty for all the sins of God’s redeemed children was fully paid for by Christ on the cross.

That is why Jesus had to die on the cross. He was paying the penalty for our sins and making it possible for His righteousness to be imputed to our account.

It is also very important to note that it was at the request of His Father that Christ went to the cross and drank the full cup of His Father's wrath, in order to be able to extend love and mercy to His redeemed church. Jesus did not go to the cross merely to satisfy God the Father's anger and wrath against sin, but went at His Father's request to purchase a redeemed people for Himself (Isaiah 53:10-12).

Concerning Immutability and Question 3

“You say that God is loving and merciful. Yet, you also say that God has a vengeful intolerance and implacable wrath against sin and sinners. So, which is it? Is He loving and merciful or is He vengeful and full of wrath?”

Hopefully, our discussions on God's immutability and the Answers to Questions 1 and 2 above have shown us that God can be both merciful and loving and, at the same time, and in perfect harmony with being merciful and loving, also be just and wrathful against sin and sinners.

Because God is Just, Holy, Righteous, and Wrathful against sin He will ever hate sin and be compelled by His own nature to punish it to the fullest degree. But because God is also Loving, Gracious, and Merciful, Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins that we may live with Him and the Father forever.

Thus we see that God's attributes of Holiness, Righteousness, and Justice are in full and perfect alignment and conformity with His attributes of Love, Mercy, and Grace.

This theme will be more fully developed in Section II of our paper.

And so, having looked at the immutability of God, the limitations that come with His immutability, and how those limitations affect our three Questions, we now want to look more deeply into another four attributes of God and see how a deeper understanding of them can help us better understand the answers to our three Questions ...

Section II – The Love, Mercy, Justice, and Wrath of God

As stated earlier, many people automatically think or feel that our first two attributes, those of love and mercy, are at odds with, contrary to, or, at least, in tension with, our last two attributes, those of justice and wrath.

But we have shown in Section I that this is not necessarily so, and that *love* and *mercy* are not necessarily the polar opposites of, or incompatible with, *justice* and *wrath*.

In the pages ahead, we hope to more fully show that there is no real conflict between these four attributes of God and that *love and mercy* can be perfectly reconciled and be shown to be completely compatible with *justice and wrath* in a unified and non-conflicting whole.

So, let's take a closer look at each of God's attributes of *love*, *mercy*, *justice*, and *wrath*, in turn – and then bring them all together to see how they relate to our three Questions.

[Note: Much of our discussion on the attributes of God that follows is taken from J. I. Packer's delightful and wonderful book Knowing God, a book which we highly recommend to all our readers.]

We will start with and spend most of our time on God's attribute of "love".

God's Attribute of "Love"

The Apostle John twice states that

"God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16)

John's statement that "*God is love*" is one of the most misinterpreted and misunderstood verses in the Bible, especially as it relates to our three questions. So we want to take a close look at exactly what the Apostle John actually *means* when he says that "*God is love*" and, equally important, what he *does not mean* when he says "*God is love*."

We will start our look at God's "love" by first looking at the four types of "love" found in the Bible and then focusing more specifically on the specific type and nature of God's "love" for His children.

**The Bible recognizes four types of "love" –
"Storge", "Phileo", "Eros", "Agape".**

"Storge" love is the love between close family members, as in the love of parents for their children and the affection of brothers and sisters for each other. Some Biblical examples would be the later bond that developed between Jacob and Esau, as shown in Genesis 33:4; the close love between Ruth and Naomi found in the book of Ruth; and our Lord's beautiful example of storge love found in John 19:26-27 in which He, from the cross, commits his mother to John's care.

“Phileo” love is the brotherly love between close friends. Some Biblical examples would be our Lord’s love for His disciples, as expressed in John 15:15; the brotherly love between David and Jonathan as expressed in I Samuel 18:1; and Christ’s new commandment for us to “love one another”, given in John 13:34-35.

“Eros” love is a romantic and passionate sexually-based intimacy. Our word “*erotic*” is derived from “Eros”. “Eros” love is a good and proper love, a gift of God, when expressed and contained within the bonds of holy marriage. For example, the Biblical book of *Song of Solomon* describes an Eros-type of love between the King and his bride, a love showing strong attraction and desire, but also showing self-control and respect. Proverbs 5:18-20 shows the goodness and joy of Eros love in marriage and the evil of Eros love outside of marriage.

“Agape” love is the sacrificial, unmerited and unselfish love that God gives and shows to His children. It is a love that seeks the good and well-being of others and often comes at a great cost to one’s own self. Agape love finds its chief and highest expression in God the Father’s sending of and our Lord Jesus Christ’s willingness to come, suffer, and die on the cross for our salvation.

[Again, we see that there is no differentiation between God the Father and God the Son. Jesus went to the cross not to appease an angry Father, but in obedience to His Father’s wishes that He do so – Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and Matthew 26:36-46].

“*Agape*” love is a love to which we as God’s redeemed and adopted children are to aspire, especially husbands to their wives (Ephesians 5:25).

God’s “agape” love is described in John 3:16, I Corinthians 13, and Isaiah 53:4-6. It is the *undeserved* love described in Romans 5:8, the *enduring* love described in Romans 8:38-39, and the *forgiving* love illustrated in the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-31. Again, it is a love to which all of God’s children are to aspire.

Christians ought always to remember that it is “*agape*” love that is expressed in the commandment to “... *love you neighbor as yourself*” (Mark 12:31) ... which is, according to our Lord, the second greatest commandment, after that of love to God (Mark 12:28-31)

[Note: “*Loving your neighbor as yourself*” finds its fullest expression in the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-37.]

We see in Matthew 5:43-48 that agape love also extends beyond our “*neighbor*” even to our “*enemies*” and those who “*persecute*” us (Matthew 5:43-48).

We are to show Agape love to “all” people, but “especially” to our fellow believers ...

“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.” (Galatians 6:10).

[Note: More than one type of love may be present at the same time. For example, the love between a husband and a wife should encompass all four types of love.]

Let’s now turn more specifically to ...

God’s Attribute of “Love” – and WHAT it specifically IS ...

When the Apostle John twice stated that

“God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16)

... he was telling us that “love” is an essential *attribute* or character trait of God.

God’s type of “love” for His children is an “agape” type of love, a love that varies greatly from the other three types of love.

When we humans speak of “love”, we are usually referring to the love of friendship (philia), the love of our family members (storge), or to romantic love or desire (Eros), each of which may or may not have some traces of agape love mixed in them. Emotions are a very great part of philia, storge, and Eros love, as all three of these forms of love are based on attractive things found in the object of their love. Philia, Storge, and Eros love usually thinks, or says, “I love you ‘because’ or “I will love you ‘if’”.

But John’s reference to God as “love” is quite different from the philia, storge and Eros types of love mentioned above. God’s type of love, “agape”, is first and foremost a self-giving type of love, a love that says “I choose to love you ‘in spite of’ all the reasons against it”.

Agape love is also an active love. Agape love originated in the mind of God and was actively implemented or expressed through His choice to redeem certain elect sinners for Himself, at a great personal cost to Himself.

God's agape love was not an emotionally-based "because" or "if" love, because when God devised His plan for our redemption there was absolutely nothing lovely in us that could have attracted or enticed Him to do so. Indeed, quite the opposite was true, as the Bible repeatedly tells us that we were, in actuality, at "enmity" with and His "enemies" at the time He chose to redeem us. Confirm ...

"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His son ..." (Romans 5:8-10)

"And you, who were once alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now he has reconciled ..." (Colossians 1:21)

"Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God." (Romans 5:8)

No, God's agape love is purely an "I choose to love you 'in spite of' all the reasons against it" agape-type of love – a love in which God simply chose to redeem a set number of people for Himself not because of anything attractive in them or any need He had within Himself, but simply because it was "the good pleasure of His will" to do it. He did it simply because it pleased Him to do it ...

"... just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world ... having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace." (Ephesians 1:4-6)

J. I. Packer says concerning God's "love" ...

"God's love is an exercise of his goodness toward individual sinners whereby, having identified himself with their welfare, he has given his Son to be their Savior, and now brings them to know and enjoy him in a covenant relation." [Knowing God, J. I. Packer, page 123].

Again, it is very important to understand that God's agape love was totally undeserved on the part of the sinner. The sinner's salvation was a pure, active "gift" of God's agape "love", mercy and grace. He simply chose to save sinners because it "pleased" Him to do so, and that while they actually were His "enemies" and "at enmity" with Him.

The IMMUTABLE NATURE of God's unchanging "love" for His redeemed children is the greatest possible source of comfort and assurance for the Christian as it means that God's love toward them will never change. As Paul writes in Romans ...

"Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:37-39)

Note well that the love with which God "loves" us is a love "which is in Christ Jesus our Lord". And, because God's love for us is founded "in Christ Jesus our Lord", we are assured that nothing "*shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

This is what God's agape love IS.

Now, let's look at ...

God's Attribute of "Love" – and WHAT it specifically IS NOT

When considering God's "love", it is very important for us to remember that God's love is but one of His attributes, and that His attribute of "love" must be defined by and understood within the context of all His other attributes.

J. I. Packer sums this up very well in his book *Knowing God* ...

"1. 'God is love' is not the complete truth about God so far as the Bible is concerned. It is not an abstract definition which stands alone, but is a summing up, from the believer's standpoint, of what the whole revelation set forth in Scripture tells us about its Author. This statement presupposes all the rest of the Biblical witness to God. The God of whom John is speaking is the God who made the world, who judged it by the flood, who called Abraham and made him a nation, who chastened his Old Testament people by conquest, captivity and exile, who sent his Son to save the world, who cast off unbelieving Israel and shortly before John wrote had destroyed Jerusalem, and who would one day judge the world in righteousness. It is this God, says John, who is love." [Note: Emphasis is Packer's.]

Packer continues ...

“It is perverse to quote John’s statement, as some do, as if it called into question the Biblical witness to the severity of God’s justice. It is not possible to argue that a God who is love cannot also be a God who condemns and punishes the disobedient; for it is precisely of the God who does these very things that John is speaking”

[J. I. Packer, Knowing God, page 120]

Packer continues to define God’s love by taking us to the Biblical statement that “*God is light*” ...

“‘*God is light.*’ ... The force of John’s words is bought out by the next clause, ‘*and in him there is no darkness at all*’ (1 John 1:5). Light means holiness and purity, as measured by God’s law; darkness means moral perversity and unrighteousness, as measured by the same law (see 1 John 2:7-11; 3:10). John’s point is that only those who ‘*walk in the light,*’ seeking to be like God in holiness and righteousness of life, and eschewing everything inconsistent with this, enjoy fellowship with the Father and the Son; those who ‘*walk in darkness,*’ whatever they may claim for themselves, are strangers to this relationship (1 John 1:6-7).

Packer concludes with a most wonderful summation ...

“So the God who is love is first and foremost light, and sentimental ideas of His love as an indulgent, benevolent softness, divorced from moral standards and concerns, must therefore be ruled out from the start. God’s love is a holy love ... He will not take into His company any person, however orthodox in mind, who will not follow after holiness of life.”

[J. I. Packer, Knowing God, page 120; Emphasis is mine.]

Having dealt with God’s “Love”, let us now turn to the attribute of God’s “Mercy” in order to help find the Answers to our three Questions ...

God’s “Mercy”

Much that has been said above about God’s love can also be said about God’s mercy.

But, first, we need to note that there is a vast difference between the mercy extended from human-to-human and the mercy extended from God-to-sinners. When mercy is extended from human-to-human (whether in a court of law or in any other situation), there are usually mitigating and extenuating circumstances and an attractiveness to or in the object of our

mercy that leads us to consider bestowing mercy in the first place. But the mercy extended by God to sinners it is quite the opposite. As noted above, there was no attractiveness whatsoever in us to draw God to show us mercy. No, we were instead His “*enemies*”, “*at enmity*” with Him, and not even inclined to think of Him, much less ask for mercy from Him.

God’s “*mercy*” to sinners was and is given by pure “*grace*”. To receive something by “*grace*” means to receive it as a free, undeserved, un-asked for and unmerited “*gift*”. God’s mercy was not extended to us as a reward conferred or a debt owed for something we had done, or because of any attractiveness found in us. No, God’s mercy was extended to us as a “*gift*” – a “*gift*” purely born of His love and grace. Confirm ...

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9)

It was out of God’s mercy (and grace and love) that He, by the mere “*good pleasure of His will*”, choose to redeem and save a certain number of undeserving sinners from utter condemnation and everlasting destruction.

Having dealt with God’s “Love” and “Mercy”, let us turn to God’s attributes of “Justice” and “Wrath” to seek a further understanding of the Answers to our three Questions ...

God’s “Justice”

God is holy, righteous, morally upright, and the fountain of all that is good, correct, pure and perfect. Because He is upright, holy and morally pure, God must be Just by nature, and must govern all He has created by His own standards of uprightness, holiness, and purity as expressed in His law. As with all of His other attributes, God must always act in accord with what He is (i.e., “*just*”) and cannot deny or go against any of His own inner character traits or attributes.

That God is Just by nature and thereby must and will move to judge and punish sin are two of the most prevalent teachings found throughout Scripture.

And, contrary to what many think and believe, the theme of God’s justice is actually *heightened* when one moves from the Old Testament to the New Testament. In fact, our Lord Jesus Himself spoke more on the reality of hell than He did on any other subject and it is our Lord Jesus Himself who will be the Judge sentencing and casting the lost into hell at

the last judgement. It was also our Lord Jesus who said, in speaking of Himself as *“the chief cornerstone”* ...

“Whoever falls on that stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.” (Luke 20:18)

Being “ground to powder” is not a light sentence.

Again, it is very important to understand that God the Father (whom many mistakenly associate almost exclusively with the Old Testament) and God the Son (Jesus in the New Testament) are of the same exact mind on everything concerning the reality of hell and the punishment of sinners. There is no difference at all in attitude or nature between them in this matter.

It is an overall lack of understanding concerning God’s attribute of *“Justice”* that leads many to mistakenly think that God will be somewhat morally indifferent to or unconcerned with what we consider to be *lesser* sins or to think that our *“good works”* that we do elsewhere will somehow offset the guilt of sins in other places (see Matthew 7:21-23), when the Bible tells us that to break even one small point of the law renders one guilty of breaking the whole of God’s law in its entirety ...

“For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.” (James 2:10)

God views every single part of His law as so important that to violate any one small part of it renders one guilty of having broken the whole law itself.

If you would have a true and accurate view of God’s attitude toward sin, the seriousness with which He takes it, and the *just* retribution that must be exacted for it, then take a long and hard look at Jesus Christ, the God/Man Himself, being brutally scourged and nailed to a cross and enduring an eternity of hell there in your place. For that is where you will find God’s true and full view of sin and justice. If God were ever to lessen the demands of justice, mute His wrath against sin, or slacken His punishment for sin, it would have been on His own Son at Calvary. But it was not so.

So, anyone who thinks that because *“God is love”*, He will in the end just wink at or overlook any part of our sin and let us all into heaven could not be more mistaken. It is true that *“God is love”*, but He is also a *“lover”* of justice, holiness and righteousness and must by His very nature move to punish sin and sinners. As with all His other attributes, He cannot deny Himself and what He is, which is a *“just”* God.

Lastly, we take up God's attribute of "Wrath" ...

God's "Wrath"

What exactly is "*wrath*"? J. I. Packer writes ...

"Wrath is an old English word defined in my dictionary as 'deep, intense anger and indignation.' Anger is defined as 'stirring of resentful displeasure and strong antagonism, by a sense of injury or insult'; indignation as 'righteous anger aroused by injustice and baseness.' Such is wrath. And wrath, the Bible tells us, is an attribute of God."

[J., I. Packer, Knowing God, page 148]

A "*Just*" God must, by His very nature, feel an intense "*wrath*" against sin and be moved to punish it. A penalty must be exacted and paid for every sin. For God's people in the Old Testament, the penalty and punishment were foreshadowed by the sacrificial system and was more fully taught, realized and exacted in the crucifixion, suffering, and death of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

Indeed, it is in the New Testament that we find the statement ...

"And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood and without shedding of blood there is no remission [of sin]." (Hebrews 9:22)

Again, because it is so important, we *must* fully realize that sin cannot and will not be simply overlooked or winked at by a "*just*" God. No! As we have repeatedly said, God cannot and will not go against His own nature. The penalty for each of our sins will be paid in one of two ways – by Christ on the cross in our place, or on us in hell forever.

But – Isn't that rather "Severe"? Isn't it really "Cruel"?

It most certainly is "*severe*". We have said from the beginning that God exacts a "*severe*" penalty for sin. Christians do not deny God's "*severity*" in punishing sin. In fact, the Apostle Paul points out God's severity in punishment in the Bible ...

"Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness." (Romans 11:22)

And, again, let's remember that it was our Lord Jesus Christ who said of Himself as "*chief cornerstone*" ...

“Whoever falls on that stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.” (Luke 20:18)

In the same way that God is exceedingly good to those sinners who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation, He is exceedingly “*severe*” with those sinners who have not.

As to being its “Cruel” ...

Packer answers ...

“In the first place, God’s wrath, in the Bible is always *judicial* – that is, it is the wrath of the Judge, administering justice. Cruelty is always immoral, but the explicit presupposition of all that we find in the Bible – and in Edward’s sermon, for that matter – on the torments of those who experience the fullness of God’s wrath is that each receives precisely what he deserves ... Jesus Himself – who actually had more to say on this subject than any other New Testament figure – made the point that retribution would be proportioned to individual desert.”

“In the second place, God’s wrath in the Bible is something which people choose for themselves.”

[J. I. Packer, Knowing God, page 151-152]

Very importantly, Packer also tells us ...

“... God’s love, as the Bible views it, never leads him to foolish, impulsive, immoral actions in the way that its human counterpart too often leads us. And in the same way, God’s wrath in the Bible is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable, morally ignoble thing that human anger so often is. It is, instead, a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil. God is only angry when anger is called for ... Would a God who did not react adversely to evil in his world be morally perfect? Surely not.”

[J. I. Packer, Knowing God, page 151]

So, God’s administration of His wrath is not cruel. “*Severe*” – Yes; “*Cruel*” – No.

[For a more in-depth look at the “*fairness*” of hell, we would refer you to the “*Honest Answers to Honest Questions*” Section of our website to *Foundational Question # 5a*, on the fairness of hell.]

**And so, we finish our deeper look at some additional attributes of God,
and return to our original Three Questions**

Question 1: *“If God is a good and loving God, why doesn’t He let everyone into heaven? Surely Jesus’s death on the cross was sufficient to cover the sins of all people everywhere! So why can’t He just relax a little and let us all in? Why must some remain in hell?”*

Question 2: *“I’ve heard it said that Jesus, God the Son, had to die to appease and satisfy an angry God the Father who was unwilling to forgive us. Is that so? If not, then ‘Why did Jesus have to die?’”*

Question 3: *“You say that God is loving and merciful. Yet, you also say that God has a vengeful intolerance and implacable wrath against sin and sinners. So, which is it? Is He loving and merciful or is He vengeful and full of wrath?”*

We said earlier that it would be in looking at the attributes, or character traits, of God that we would find the answers to our three Questions. And so we have ...

Question # 1 asked ...

“If God is a good and loving God, why doesn’t He let everyone into heaven? Surely Jesus’s death on the cross was sufficient to cover the sins of all people everywhere! So why can’t He just relax a little and let us all in? Why must some remain in hell?”

Both Section I and Section 2 have shown us that God cannot just forgive or “overlook” our sins because He is a “Just,” “Holy,” and “Righteous” God, and must, by His own immutable nature, not only have an intense Wrath against sin, but must also move to punish it. God cannot go against Himself or deny His own character or attributes by “just letting everyone into heaven”.

We grossly fail to appreciate the seriousness and heinousness of sin in God’s eyes. As we said above ...

If you would have a true and accurate view of God’s attitude toward sin, the seriousness with which He takes it, and the retribution that will be exacted for it, then take a long and hard look at Jesus Christ, the God/Man Himself, being brutally scourged and nailed to a cross and enduring an eternity of hell there in your place.

So, “Yes, God is love”, but He is also a lover of justice – and He cannot deny Himself.

We do note that the death of Jesus Christ would most certainly have been “sufficient” to cover the sins of everybody in the world, but it was not God’s choice to do so. God chose to extend “mercy” to a great many, but not to all. It was His choice to make and we should not question or charge Him, the God of wisdom and justice, on it.

Truth be told, God was under no obligation to save any. That He saved some by having Jesus Christ pay the penalty for their sins leaves no ground for those not chosen for salvation to complain, though they will curse and rail against Him throughout eternity for not choosing them.

“Why” God chose to do it the way He did is known only to Himself and must, for us, remain among the “hidden things” of God.

Question # 2 was ...

“I’ve heard it said that Jesus, God the Son, had to die to appease and satisfy an angry God the Father who was unwilling to forgive us. Is that so? If not, then ‘Why did Jesus have to die?’”

As we saw in both Sections, no sinner can stand before our holy, just, and righteous God. Before he can stand before God, he must first have his guilt removed and be covered with the righteousness of Christ. The penalty due for an individual’s every sin must be fully satisfied and a full atonement made for it.

God’s wonderful solution to man’s problem was, in an amazing display of agape love, to send the Lord Jesus Christ to die on the cross in our place to pay the penalty due to us for our sins and to cover us with His own righteousness.

Because of Jesus’s death on the cross, when we exercise saving faith in Christ two very wonderful things happen to us ...

First, our sins are imputed (i.e., reckoned or accounted) to Jesus and fully paid for by Him on the cross. This makes us “*Not Guilty*” before God’s bar of Justice.

“And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which

was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” (Colossians 2:13-15)

Second, Jesus’s righteousness is imputed (i.e., accounted, reckoned) to our account. In addition to being “*Not Guilty*” we are also made to be “*Righteous*” before God’s bar of Justice.

“For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” (2 Corinthians 5:21)

We note that we are not inherently “righteous” in and of ourselves or in our own person, but are covered with the “foreign” righteousness of Jesus Christ.

The result of these two legal imputations, imputations made in God’s court of Law during our Justification process, is that when God looks upon us in judgment (or at any other time), He sees not our sins, which have been paid for, removed, and banished, but sees the full and total righteousness of His own dear Son credited to our account.

That is why Jesus had to die on the cross, so that He might pay the penalty for all our sins and allow for us to be covered by His righteousness instead of our guilt.

Again, very importantly, Jesus went to the cross NOT to appease an angry Father who was unwilling to forgive, BUT went in obedience to God the Father’s request for Him to do so in order to redeem a people for Himself. This is beautifully expressed in what is perhaps the most well-known verse in the Bible ...

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16)

Confirm also Acts 2:22-24, Isaiah 53, and John 17.

And so, we arrive at Question # 3 ...

“You say that God is loving and merciful. Yet, you also say that God has a vengeful intolerance and implacable wrath against sin and sinners. So, which is it? Is He loving and merciful or is He vengeful and full of wrath?”

We have hopefully shown in both Sections I and II and in our answers to Questions 1 and 2 just above, that this is not an “either/or” question and that it is very explainable and reasonable

for God to have and exercise the attributes of “*love and mercy*” and “*justice and wrath*” in perfect harmony at the same time.

As a final word, we would say again, “Go to the cross for your answer to Question 3”

For at the cross of Jesus Christ you will see – *Love fulfilled, Mercy extended, Justice satisfied, and Wrath averted to and exacted upon God Himself ...*

At the cross of Jesus Christ you will see – *God’s attributes of Love and Mercy reconciled, fused with, and made the perfect compliments of His Justice and Wrath.*

At the cross of Jesus Christ you will see – a God who is at the same time loving, merciful, just and wrathful against sin. You will see a God of whom it is written ...

*“He is despised and rejected by men,
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.*

*Surely He has borne our griefs
And carried our sorrows;
Yet we esteem Him stricken,
Smitten by God, and afflicted.
But He as wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,
And by His stripes we are healed.
We all like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, every one, to his own way;
And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53: 3,4-6)*

So, go to the cross of Christ, my friend, and there you will find immeasurably more than just the answers to three questions.