

THEISM

Is God Cruel?

Atheists sometimes claim that God is cruel. They say that the Bible demonstrates God's cruelty. They note that God destroyed all the earth's population, except for eight people, with a flood during the time of Noah (Genesis 7). God sent fire from heaven to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24-25). God sent plagues upon the Egyptians to destroy their crops and their cattle (Exodus 9:13-26). He even killed their firstborn (Exodus 11:1-30). God caused the Israelites to destroy seven nations in the land Canaan (Deuteronomy 7:1; Joshua 11:1-15; 24:11; Amos 2:9; Acts 13:19). When the Israelites were unfaithful to God, He also had them destroyed (1 Chronicles 5:25-26). He had the Babylonians destroy Jerusalem and had the Israelites carried into captivity (2 Kings 24:1-16). The Bible records many incidents wherein God brought destruction and death upon people through warfare and famines (2 Samuel 21:1; 1 Kings 17-18; Psalm 105:16; Isaiah 14:28-32; Joel 1:1-15). Moreover, the Bible declares that, after this life is over, people will continue to exist but that God will send some to eternal condemnation in a burning fire that will never be quenched (Matthew 10:28; 25:41-46; John 5:29). From these and other biblical accounts, atheists contend that the Bible portrays God as cruel.

In response to this way of thinking several observations seem appropriate. ***First, atheists***, by definition, ***do not believe in the existence of God***. When atheists argue that the God of the Bible is cruel, they are not conceding that God exists. Rather, they are arguing that the God of the Bible, being cruel, does not deserve being considered worthy of existence or of being designated as deity. They also imply that belief in such a God is unworthy of their sense of moral and ethical values.

Second, atheists cite biblical examples of God's destruction without recognizing why God destroys. Atheists focus attention only upon calamities. They do not concede that those calamities may be God's punishments upon people because of their sins. Although God prepared the Garden of Eden for Adam and Eve, he forced them out of it and declared death on them because they disobeyed him by eating forbidden fruit (Genesis 2:16-17; 3:16-24). God destroyed the world's population in the days of Noah because "every intent of the thoughts of his (i.e., mankind's) heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because their sin was "very grave." Not even ten righteous persons could be found within the city (Genesis 18:20-32; Jude 1:7). The Egyptians were destroyed because they had afflicted God's people, the Israelites (Numbers 20:15; Deuteronomy 26:6; 1 Samuel 10:18). God destroyed the Amorites in Canaan because their iniquity became complete, i.e., full (Genesis 15:16; Leviticus 18:25; 1 Kings 21:26). God allowed the Israelites to be enslaved and captured during the time of the judges and during the times of their kings because they turned away from him and served other gods (Judges 2:14; 6:1-10; 1 Kings 9:3-7; 11:4-11; 2 Kings 17:7-23). Moreover, God condemns some to eternal punishment because of their iniquities (Matthew 7:21-23) and for failure to obey the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:6-9).

Third, to charge God with cruelty is to judge God. To do so means that the created stand in judgment against the creator (see Romans 9:20-21). Such a judgment is itself ungodly because God, not man, sets the standard for value judgments. God, not man, is the judge of the world. Moreover, without God, there is no universal absolute standard to which everyone can appeal. Without a uniform standard by which values can be measured, concepts of right and wrong may vary as much as people. Without God, people determine values either collectively or individually. Without God, value determinations vary from time to time and from place to place. Therefore, without God, what

some consider cruel, others may consider appropriate, and vice-versa. Likewise, what theists consider right because they base their evaluations on God and His word, atheists may consider wrong, even cruel, because they do not believe in God or His word.

Fourth, while some people may think God's punishments for sins are too harsh, their evaluations of the horror of sin may be too low. God defines sin as lawlessness (1 John 3:4, N-KJV), i.e., sin is a violation of God's laws. God alone establishes moral foundations. God alone is free from sin and therefore God alone is the proper judge to determine appropriate penalties for sin. God alone fully knows the horror of sin. Since God declares that evil must be punished, then the extent of future punishment (i.e., eternal hell fire) only demonstrates the unspeakable heinousness of sin. While human beings may not desire to inflict punishments as severe as God does, human desires – based upon limited understandings of morals and the horrors of sin – reflect only differences in preferences regarding moral governance. Preferential differences do not constitute a sufficient foundation for claiming that God is cruel.

Fifth, the Bible does not portray God as cruel. The biblical image of God is that he is good (Psalm 25:8; Nahum 1:7; Matthew 19:17), ***merciful*** (Numbers 14:18-19; Deuteronomy 4:31; Isaiah 55:7; Nehemiah 9:31; Psalm 86:15; 103:8; Luke 6:36; Ephesians 2:4), ***and just*** (Deuteronomy 10:17; 32:4; Isaiah 45:21; Jeremiah 32:19; Psalm 98:9).

That God is good means that He supplies temporal needs (Acts 14:17), that good and perfect gifts come from Him (James 1:17), that His goodness leads to repentance (Romans 2:4), and that because his goodness cannot tolerate evil, sins must be punished (Deuteronomy 31:18; Ezra 9:13; Psalm 5:4; Jeremiah 23:2). The goodness of God is amply declared in scripture (Psalm 52:1; Romans 2:4; Psalm 143:10; Matthew 19:17).

That God is merciful means that He is forgiving (Psalm 86:5; 1 John 1:9), pardons iniquity (Micah 7:18), and saves us (John 3:16-17; Acts 13:23; 1 Corinthians 1:21; 1 Thessalonians 5:9; Titus 3:5). God wants people to repent (Luke 15:11-32; 2 Peter 3:9). God had rather people do right and enjoy his blessings, rather than do wrong and receive his curses (Deuteronomy 7:9-15; 28; Exodus 15:26; Ezekiel 33:11; Amos 5:14; Jonah 3:8). God's mercy may be recognized because, of His own initiative, he initiated sacrifices to atone for sins (Exodus 29:36; Leviticus 1:4; 4:20; 16:10; 23:27; 1 Chronicles 6:49; John 3:16-17; Romans 5:5-11; Hebrews 7:27; 9:12; 10:10).

That God is just means that He judges in righteousness. Because God created the heavens and the earth, God instituted the laws of nature. He also gave laws for humanity through Adam, (Genesis 2:16-17), through Noah (Genesis 9:1-17), through Moses (Exodus 24:12; Numbers 21:31; Deuteronomy 4:44), and through Christ (Galatians 6:2). Since none could be justified by law (Romans 3:10, 23), God gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him might be justified (Romans 1:16-17; 5:1, 9; Galatians 2:16). By his justice God renders verdicts either to acquit from guilt or to pronounce condemnation (Matthew 25:31-46). God proportions penalties to fit sins committed (Deuteronomy 25:2-3; Mark 12:40; Luke 12:42-48). Generally speaking, death is a punishment for sin (Genesis 2:17, 22-24; Romans 5:12). God often punishes people for their specific sins (Genesis 4:10-14; Joshua 5:6; 1 Samuel 15:26-29; 28:16-19; 2 Kings 18:11-12) Eternal punishment awaits those who do not obey God (Romans 2:5-10; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-9).

God gives only two options. Either believe and obey Him, or disbelieve and disobey. Since belief and obedience brings God's blessings, and since disbelief and disobedience results in God's punishment, is it not wise to believe and obey Him? (See Matthew 7:24-27).