



Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God: The Scandalous Truth of the Very Good News

By Brian Zahnd

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In his famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Puritan revivalist Jonathan Edwards shaped predominating American theology with a vision of God as angry, violent, and retributive. Three centuries later, Brian Zahnd was both mesmerized and terrified by Edwards’s wrathful God. Haunted by fear that crippled his relationship with God, Zahnd spent years praying for a divine experience of hell.

What Zahnd experienced instead was the Father’s love—revealed perfectly through Jesus Christ—for all prodigal sons and daughters.

In *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*, Zahnd asks important questions like: Is seeing God primarily as wrathful towards sinners true or biblical? Is fearing God a normal expected behavior? And where might the natural implications of this theological framework lead us?

Thoughtfully wrestling with subjects like Old Testament genocide, the crucifixion of Jesus, eternal punishment in hell, and the final judgment in Revelation, Zahnd maintains that the summit of divine revelation for sinners is not *God is wrath*, but *God is love*.

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Editorial Review

Review

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

—Rachel Held Evans, author of *Searching for Sunday*

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

—Tony Jones, author of *Did God Kill Jesus?*

“Brian Zahnd walks boldly into the violent propensity of so much Christian theology and preaching that has wounded so many people, a propensity in which he himself has participated. He not only shows what bad, irresponsible theology this is, pervasive as it continues to be; he exposes the ‘hackneyed trope of dispensationalism’ that feeds so much worldly violence and that authorizes so much wounding. But more than that, in his poetic mode, Zahnd invites to an alternative that is grounded not in ‘Biblicism’ but in the reality of Jesus who embodies the inexplicable love of God that passes all human understanding. Zahnd writes as one emancipated to evangelical joy. He invites his readers to walk with him into such a God-given vocation that honors the God of love and that loves the neighbor.”

—Walter Brueggemann, Columbia Theological Seminary

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

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

“I can’t count the times I felt like standing and cheering while reading this book. Brian Zahnd knows his material extremely well. He speaks from a blend of study and experience, with the authority of a theologian, the care of a shepherd, and the inspiring beauty of a poet. From Genesis to Revelation, Brian helps us identify, expose, and oppose the weaponization of Scripture and instead embrace Jesus as the Bible’s central theme and God’s ultimate self-disclosure. If you read one book about Jesus this year...buy mine. But if you read two, this one will do just nicely.”

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

“With too many American Christian leaders echoing the angry, arrogant, vindictive, and violent rhetoric of our political culture, it’s hard to imagine a book more relevant and needed than Brian Zahnd’s *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*. Zahnd rightly helps us see that for better or worse, we reflect the image of the God

we believe in. Zahnd's insights into Scripture are rich and deep, making clear that if we want a less violent future, we need a vision of a nonviolent God."

—Brian D. McLaren, author of *The Great Spiritual Migration*

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

—Adam Hamilton, pastor and author of *Making Sense of the Bible*

"Without overstatement, I believe we are living in the midst of a seismic, apocalyptic shift in how we understand the character of God. There is a widescreen revelation of God's heart unfolding, shaking the very foundations of the Church. This revelation of the tenderness of God is so vast and pervasive that all kinds of former assumptions must be called into question—demanding that violent 'texts of terror,' in Phyllis Trible's phrase, be revisited. Brian Zahnd is the most lucid, crisp, prophetic articulator of this revelation/revolution, and *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God* is him at his incisive best. It is masterfully written, illuminating both the Jesus of Scripture and the violence of the world that rejected him. At the intersection of John the Baptist and Bob Dylan, Brian Zahnd prepares the way for us to behold and see that the God we heard was a lion, was actually a lamb all along. This is startling, revelatory reading."

—Jonathan Martin, author of *How to Survive a Shipwreck and Prototype*

About the Author

Brian Zahnd founded Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri over 35 years ago, and he still serves as lead pastor to a congregation committed to authentic expression of Jesus Christ in the twenty-first century. He's also the author of *Water to Wine*, *A Farewell to Mars*, *Beauty Will Save the World*, *Unconditional?*, and *What to Do on the Worst Day of Your Life*.

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Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God

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

I fashioned my handmade copy of Jonathan Edwards's famous sermon because I was fascinated by it. I wanted to memorize portions for my preaching arsenal. This famous sermon preached on July 8, 1741, has long been associated with the Great Awakening, and as a young pastor I wanted to help lead a new spiritual awakening in America...or at least in my fledgling church. My logic was as simple as it was naïve: if it worked for Jonathan Edwards, it should work for me. If Edwards could scare people into repentance, maybe I could too. Evangelism by terrorism. Conversion by coercion. Edwards's sensational sermon is eighteenth-

century hellfire preaching in its most articulate form. Most modern Americans become acquainted with “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” in school where, for some strange reason, it is a standard example of descriptive writing. Probably the most famous part of the sermon is the spider passage.

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

Lovely, isn’t it? God depicted as a sadistic juvenile dangling spiders over a fire. We do have to admit the writing is descriptive. I’m sure Edgar Allan Poe would be impressed. We feel the revulsion Edwards intends as he shifts the analogy of how God views sinners from loathsome spiders to venomous snakes. Most of us don’t care much for spiders and snakes. But here’s the question: Is it true? Is it true that God is so dreadfully provoked to wrath by our sin that he looks upon us as abominable snakes and loathsome spiders? Does God abhor sinners and view them as worthy of nothing else than to be cast into hellfire? Well, that’s what Jonathan Edwards said, and as a twenty-five-year-old preacher I believed it. Who was I to argue with the great revivalist? So let the gospel terrorizing begin! The spider passage may be the most well-known part of Edwards’s most famous sermon, but my favorite part was toward the end when Edwards is hammering home the everlasting nature of God’s wrath.

It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity: there will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery: When you look forward, you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all; you will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance; and then when you have so done, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains.[2]

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

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

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

At this point I should clarify that Jonathan Edwards’s most famous sermon is not representative of his entire preaching ministry. He wasn’t always terrorizing his congregation with lurid depictions of hell, and it may be

unfair that his best-known sermon is “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Nevertheless, Edwards preached that sermon, and it has left its mark on the religious imagination of America. It is generally regarded as the most important sermon in American history. And this is a tragedy. It’s regrettable this sermon has shaped the American vision of God for nearly three centuries. Of course, all sermons are preached within a context, and Reverend Edwards was apparently the pastor of a particularly difficult and contentious church. As a pastor I can sympathize with being so fed up with a congregation that you want to call them a bunch of loathsome insects that God is ready to fling into the fire, but still, is it true?! Does God really hate sinners? Is the heart of God really a volcano of seething rage? Is the living God really an angry God?

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

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

A well-meaning but unhelpful Sunday school teacher gave me a Chick tract when I was twelve, and those garish images with their ludicrous theology burned their way into my adolescent imagination. I had met the angry God! And I was afraid, very afraid. Who wouldn’t be? Think about it. In the gospel according to J. T. Chick, if you don’t believe just right, an omnipotent giant will consign you to eternal torture! Fortunately, I could believe in Jesus and be saved from his Father—the angry God. But then I heard a revival preacher ask a disturbing question: “Do you believe in Jesus in your heart or just in your head?” He went on to say that if we believed in Jesus in our heads but not our hearts, we would miss heaven by eighteen inches and wind up in hell forever! More anxiety-inducing theology! Now I had to decide if I had faith in my heart or if I was on my way to hell because I only believed in Jesus with my head. That’s a lot of pressure for a twelve-year-old...or anyone. I had grown up believing in Jesus, but now I had to decide if I was believing with my head or my heart. My eternal destiny was at stake. If I got it wrong, I would be tortured forever. But how could I know? How could I be sure? I thought I believed in Jesus with my heart, but that thought was in my head, so...let the madness begin! What I did know was that I liked Jesus, but I was really scared of his Dad, the faceless white giant with obvious anger issues who hurled Catholics and others who didn’t believe just right into the fires of Mount Doom. And presumably some of those hapless souls thrown into hell were Baptist kids who tried to believe in Jesus with their hearts but really only believed in Jesus in their heads. That kind of theology is a prescription for religious psychosis! The image of the angry God haunted my adolescence. Did the specter of the angry God help me toe the line? Maybe. Maybe not. But that’s not the question. The real question isn’t “Does it scare kids straight?” but “Is it true?” The real question isn’t “Does it motivate people to pray a sinner’s prayer?” but “Is it faithful to the God revealed in Jesus?” Is God accurately represented when depicted as a faceless and remorseless white giant whose anger fuels the raging flames of hell?

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

Oh! Ephraim is my dear, dear son,

my child in whom I take pleasure!

Every time I mention his name,

my heart bursts with longing for him!

Everything in me cries out for him.

Softly and tenderly I wait for him.[4]

There's nothing about loathsome spiders and venomous serpents in this sermon. (Though I admit that if you want to find passages like that in the Bible, you can.) In Jeremiah's sermon we find a beautiful bit of poetry channeling the heart of God for beloved Ephraim. And who is Ephraim? Ephraim is Israel in the seventh century BC. More significantly, Ephraim is Israel in its worst spiritual condition and lowest moral ebb. Ephraim is idolatrous, adulterous, backslid, covenant-breaking, sinful Israel. But Ephraim is still the child of God, and Jeremiah reveals God's unconditional love for his prodigal son, the wayward Ephraim. Seven centuries before the full revelation of God that will come with Jesus, Jeremiah's poetry captures the heart of God toward sinners. This is the heart of God toward me. Toward you. This is the good news that God is love. At our worst, at our most sinful, at our furthest remove from God and his will, God's attitude toward us remains one of unwavering love. J. T. Chick and his menacing portraits of God are wrong. As it turns out, God is neither menacing nor faceless. Jesus Christ is the face of the Father. The apostle Paul said it this way: "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." [5] Jesus is the One who shows us the face, the countenance, the disposition, the attitude of the Father. The apostle John is very bold when he tells us, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." [6] That is an audacious claim. For when John says, "No one has ever seen God," we could use the Bible to argue with the apostle. What about Abraham? He saw God and shared a meal with him under the oaks of Mamre. What about Jacob? He saw God at the top of that ladder as the angels ascended and descended at Bethel. What about Moses? He met God face to face. What about the seventy elders of Israel? They too saw God on the top of Mount Sinai. What about Isaiah? He saw God "in the year that King Uzziah died...and the train of his robe filled the temple." [7] What about Ezekiel? He saw visions of God by the river Chebar in Babylon. With these biblical proof texts we could argue with John's claim that no one has ever seen God. But I can imagine John replying, "You don't have to teach me the Bible. I know all the stories, from Genesis to Malachi. But no matter what visions, dreams, revelations, epiphanies, theophanies, or Christophanies people had in times past, they pale into insignificance when compared to the full revelation of God that we have in Jesus Christ!" Then the writer of Hebrews chimes in to affirm what John has said: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.... He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being." [8] God has a face and he looks like Jesus. God has a disposition toward sinners and it's the spirit of Jesus. This is the beautiful gospel. God is not the faceless white giant of a Chick tract. God is like Jesus. God has always been like Jesus. There has never been a time when God was not like Jesus; we haven't always known this, but now we do. God is like Jesus! God is not a sadistic monster who abhors sinners and dangles them over a fiery pit. God is exactly how Jesus depicted him in his most famous parable: a father who runs to receive, embrace, and restore a prodigal son. It's not a Chick tract or a Puritan sermon that perfectly reveals the nature of God, but Jesus! This is why I deeply reject the horrid distortion of God given to us in the angry-God motifs. I understand how this image of God can be justified. I understand we can use the Bible as our palette to paint a monstrous portrait of God, but when we're finished, if the image doesn't look like Jesus, we have got it wrong! It's a false and distorted portrait. Having seen the face of God in Jesus Christ, I cannot

abide J. T. Chick's faceless giant or Jonathan Edwards's angry God. Neither could the great George MacDonald.

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

[2]. Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," 181–182.

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

[4]. Jeremiah 31:20, msg.

[5]. 2 Corinthians 4:6.

[6]. John 1:18.

[7]. Isaiah 6:1, esv.

[8]. Hebrews 1:1–3.

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