

## Before we begin...

IT WAS A GREY, OVERCAST DAY in October 1993. I had met up with my wife Catherine in her lunch-hour, and we were now standing at the door of an ugly modern house rather incongruously set within the grand architecture of central Oxford.

We rang the bell.

It wasn't the first time we'd been there. A few days earlier we'd been standing in exactly the same place. That time, after a long wait, the door had been briskly opened by a large grey-haired man. I think it was Catherine who spoke. I can't remember the exact words she used, but it was something like: 'Hello, we'd like to talk to you about Christianity. We've been thinking about it, and we'd like to find out more'.

He didn't flinch. Sorry, they were in the middle of lunch. Could we come back some other time? We fixed a date, and went away.

So here we were, back again. The same imposing figure opened the door. He looked pleased to see us and hustled us excitedly into the living-room. 'I'm so glad you came back!'

He sat us down, offered us coffee, and handed us a couple of Bibles.

Now I was definitely feeling uncomfortable. I kept thinking, 'What on *earth* am I doing here?' I hadn't even been particularly keen on coming. I was beginning to feel I should have been a little firmer with Catherine—that I should have put a stop to all this nonsense much earlier. It was a feeling like being sucked into some lengthy sales pitch for a dubious time-share deal—a desperate feeling that we should just get out before we were forced into something regrettable.

Neither of us come from Christian families. My parents would probably describe themselves as agnostic, but I grew up in an atmosphere of scepticism about most things, and that certainly covered religion. Both Catherine and I had managed to get through our student years completely oblivious to anything remotely Christian. By my early twenties I would have been happy to call myself an atheist. Catherine might not have put it so strongly, but her views would have been pretty much the same.

We were only here because of Catherine's curiosity about one of her work-colleagues. She was working at the time in a basement laboratory, as a member of a team firing lasers at blobs of atoms. One other member of the team was a Christian. This was novel: neither of us had met a Christian who talked so openly about God and his faith. Over the last two years he had patiently answered our questions and encouraged us to find out more. Even when he moved away to Paris, we continued the discussion by post. We received long letters (the only letters

I've ever received with footnotes!), dealing with my heated objections. Eventually he persuaded us to go and talk to someone else about it, and gave us directions to the house where we were now sitting.

'What do you think happened on the cross?' asked the grey-haired man in the armchair opposite.

We were at a loss to know what to say. What sort of answer was he hunting for? That the man called Jesus was executed? It seemed too obvious. Our mumbled replies made him realise that he needed to start a little further back.

He tried a different tack. 'Do you think it's right,' he asked, 'that people should be punished for the things they do wrong?'

Now that was a question! I can't tell you the complex series of thoughts that went through my head when he asked that. You see, at the time, I was studying economics; indeed, a rather rarefied branch of economics called 'Game Theory', which has plenty to say about why and how people are punished. I was just about to give a classic economist's answer and say, 'Well, it depends...' But I stopped myself and thought for a second. Putting aside all the academic complications, *what did I really think?* Did I *really* think that it's right for people to be punished for the things they do wrong? Well, maybe—certainly sometimes. Hesitantly, I said so.

He nodded, and then got us to open the Bibles he had given us. And he explained what had happened on the cross.

God must punish wrong-doing. God must punish sin, he explained. Many people have a view that God is 'just love' in a way that means he will not punish sin, he said. But to truly understand the love of God, we need to understand that God is also *just*. I didn't really get it then—not in any depth. It felt at the time that I could so easily have argued against it. Indeed,

I could have argued in a rather sophisticated way against it. I could have argued in such a way as to have left this man, with his slightly manic look and his Bible in his hands, high and dry, baffled by the technicalities of modern approaches to the theory of punishment.

But (thank God) I didn't. I understood enough to know that, whatever the textbooks and theorists say, I, Ben Cooper, desperately needed God's forgiveness. I understood enough to see that God could not just forget about the wrong stuff in my life—that he had to deal with it. So, for the first time in my life, and against every instinct, I prayed. On that day in October 1993, I prayed that God would forgive me. And Catherine followed a few minutes after. We had been married for three years. Nothing now would ever quite be the same again.



### **Why I wrote this book...**

Many years on from that day, I now realise that the struggles I had to understand this basic fact about God are not mine alone. Many people wrestle with the question of justice in this world and the next. How is it that a God who is revealed to us as the source and essence of love can *also* be a judge who punishes wrongdoers? The question and its answer in the Bible is not, at one level, hard to understand, but the implications for us are enormous. This book was born out of my own struggles with this issue, and my growing awareness that it is an area of what God says about himself in the Bible that many people have similar difficulties with.

I am specifically writing for three kinds of people.

If you are **unconvinced** by the claim that God must punish sin, then you *could* read on to confirm your scepticism. You might write me off as someone trying to defend a rather crazy decision he made some time ago—to save face. I hope you don't. Because if your scepticism is that strong, then I wonder if there is *anything* I could say to change your mind. As a sceptic, you'll always be able to come up with some psychologically plausible story to explain my strange set of beliefs.

Although, if your scepticism is *that* strong, I might also wonder how you manage to function in life at all. When you wake up, your eyes are trying to persuade you that you're lying in your bedroom. But you doubt it. It's probably an illusion generated by some mad scientist who has your brain bottled in his Transylvanian laboratory. Scepticism at this level can really mess your life up.

If you are approaching this book as a sceptic, then let me encourage you to read on *doubting your doubts*. Why not take this opportunity to re-examine the way you look at the world? Why not allow yourself to be challenged and provoked? If your current way of looking at things is well-founded, then reading with an open mind should hold no fears for you. But let me also be honest with you about my intentions: my hope is that you will come to believe, as I did, that you need forgiveness from God. And my prayer is that you find it.

On the other hand, you might be someone **genuinely curious** about the Christian faith. Perhaps you've already started investigating. And there's much you've seen and heard that you've found very attractive, except... Well, except this whole subject. You're surprised by how often when you dip into the Bible you're confronted by an angry God, a God acting in judgment and punishment. And you're troubled by the fact that Jesus, whom in many ways you find compelling, seems to buy

into this big theme of judgment. What's more, many committed Christians tell you that this aspect of the faith, far from being an optional extra, is right at the heart of things.

If that's you, then I hope this book will be an opportunity for you to think through the whole issue. How does the God who acts in punishment fit with the God who is love? If the fact that God is love means that he is 'just love', how can he ever punish anyone? What does it mean to say that someone deserves punishment? For what purpose does God act in punishment? What does it achieve? Those are some of the issues we shall be tackling in the course of this book. And we shall be taking a close look at some carefully reasoned explanations of why God must punish sin.

You may, alternatively, read this book a third way. You may read it as someone who would already describe yourself as a **Christian** but who yet remains deeply uncomfortable about the Bible's picture of a God who punishes sin. You're well aware that many people describing themselves as Christian flatly deny it and might even say it was anti-Christian. And if there's one aspect of the Christian message that you're tempted to feel ashamed of it's this. You're happy to talk to your friends about a relationship with Jesus, about the way of love and self-sacrifice—but *this*...

For you, my hope and prayer is that reading this book will restore your confidence that this idea is the truth. And that, being persuaded that our loving Father in heaven is also the judge who will punish sin, you will find a boldness to defend it. And, God-willing, you should be able to say why.

### **'Must'?**

I ought to get straight exactly what it is I'm hoping to show

you from what God says about himself in the Bible. It's this: God is not 'just love' in a way that smothers his determination to punish sin. Rather, God's love is a just love. God *must* punish sin. My claim is that this is what God says and argues himself. It is, largely speaking, a fairly straightforward claim. 'Sin', for the moment, we can take to be a way of talking about wrong-doing. Punishing wrongdoing is hardly an unfamiliar idea. And it doesn't take much reading in the Bible to find God frequently punishing wrong-doing, or warning that he will punish it. That God does punish wrong-doing is fairly plain.

But to claim that God *must* punish sin is profoundly different. And we need to be clear what we *don't* mean by that, as well as what we do.

What I certainly don't mean in saying that God must punish sin is this: I don't mean that there is something external to God which *makes* him punish sin—to suggest that God is *under* some 'force', 'law' or 'rule' that is in some way greater than him. As I will emphasise repeatedly, God is dependent on nothing and no-one.

What I do mean when I say 'God must punish sin' is this. **Given what it is possible to know about God, we cannot rightly conceive of him doing anything else. Anything other than *always* punishing *every* act of sin.** I mean that it would be out of character, inconsistent, even weird, for him not to punish sin. God never acts out of character, and it's in that sense that he 'must' do things consistent with his character. That's what I mean by 'God *must* punish sin'.

We all see something like this in everyday life. For people I know very well, I can say with some certainty things they will always do or will never do. I can think of someone whose arachnophobia means I can safely assert that she will never

keep a tarantula as a pet. People we know are never entirely consistent, of course, and I guess that one day she could surprise me. Not so with God. He makes statements about himself that carry a great degree of certainty; which means that, in principle at least, we can make statements about him that also suggest a high degree of certainty.

This is one of the reasons why the Bible will play a central role in the arguments of this book. How can we get to know God well enough to make such assertions about him? To know him well enough to make a claim as strong as ‘he *must* punish sin’? Well, it is God’s own claim in the Bible that it is through the Scriptures that he engages with people and speaks to them. I simply don’t have the space to defend that fully here, except to say that we quickly run into problems finding any *other* way of coming to know God.\* If we rely on anything less or anything more than the whole Bible then we run into huge problems trying to identify what is and what isn’t the authentic voice of God. You may well find the references to biblical books in what follows occasionally hard going if you’re not used to doing that. But be assured that they are not there out of some sort of ‘knee-jerk’ fundamentalism. There are very good reasons for taking the Bible as the trustworthy speech of God. As words through which we can get to know him—truly, if not exhaustively.

### **Why it matters so much**

Another thing we ought to get straight before we begin is just how much is at stake here.

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\*For an thoughtful investigation of this issue, you could try *Why believe the Bible?* by John Blanchard.

Let me present you with a betting proposition. It comes from Blaise Pascal, a terribly clever French thinker, and it is sometimes known as ‘Pascal’s wager’. Pascal was one of those rather annoying people who are stunningly good at everything they turn to. In the seventeenth century he made ground-breaking contributions to analytical geometry, physics and the theory of probability; he even made one of the first mechanical calculating machines. While meditating on philosophy and religion, Pascal proposed a bet that went something like this: Suppose God exists. If you bet for God and believe in him, then you’ll receive an unimaginably huge reward in heaven. Unless you think it utterly impossible that God exists, he argued, it then makes sense to bet for him.

Similarly, if you *do not* bet for God and ignore him, then you will receive an unimaginable punishment in hell. Again, unless you think it utterly impossible that God exists, it makes sense to wager for him.

In other words, you would be mad not to ‘bet’ on God by believing in him, given the upside of belief and the downside of unbelief. As they say in the States it’s a no-brainer.

Some people think *Pascal’s wager* is frightfully clever. However, if you wouldn’t describe yourself as a Christian, I don’t suppose you’re now thinking, ‘Wow, I never thought of it like that before! I think I *will* believe in God!’ Clever as it is, I don’t suppose you’re persuaded.

But why not? I suppose the answer is that we tend to treat the idea of huge rewards in heaven or a terrible punishment in hell as *effectively* impossible—as too unlikely to matter. We put them in the same category as suddenly discovering that you are next in line for the throne, or being hit by an asteroid on the way to the shops, or being swallowed by the office photocopier.

er at work. (Although my own experience with photocopiers suggests that we may be wise to be more cautious here!) With the rewards and punishments too unlikely to matter, we can treat Pascal's wager as merely an interesting philosophical discussion—and that, indeed, is the way people have treated it ever since he raised it.

Imagine a wonderfully civilised scene: a group of friends are enjoying an animated conversation around some fine food and wine. Someone innocently mentions the recent increases in armed crime that headed the news that day. The discussion occupies the next ten minutes: some people being deliberately controversial; some occasionally chipping in with a witty remark; others just keeping quiet and enjoying the banter. But the occasion would have a very different feel, I would guess, if the original questioner drew out a hand-gun and threatened to shoot the entire company.

That's the sort of danger I want to warn you about as we begin this book. We're going to argue about whether God must punish sin. We could proceed as if this were merely some abstract discussion about the character of God. But that would be deceptive. If you are actually persuaded by the arguments in this book, then be warned that things will suddenly get very personal. Like the moment when someone unexpectedly pulls a gun on you, you'll be staring a life and death situation in the face.

If you're persuaded by the arguments in this book, then a whole host of things may change. What you think about yourself may change. What you think about what happened on the cross may change. You may change what you think about what it means to be 'saved' by God. Most of all, perhaps, what you think about that decision whether to 'bet' for God may change. When you read about 'Pascal's wager' you may have thought I

was being flippant—treating God and belief on the same level as buying a scratchcard. But suppose you were persuaded that God will act in punishment against each and every act of sin. Persuaded that, far from being ‘too unlikely to matter’, it is *an absolute certainty that it will happen*.

If you were persuaded of that, then suddenly it becomes a very serious decision indeed.



# 1. Into the Fray

IN SHAKESPEARE'S *Henry V*, on the night before the battle of Agincourt, the King disguises himself as an ordinary officer. He wants to know the state of his troops. He wants to know their morale the night before a battle in which they will face an army far better equipped and far greater in number. As he wanders in the chill of the night, talking to people from every class and station, the sense of foreboding and fear is heavy in the night air. The scene ends with him praying against the terror that threatens to paralyse his troops, knowing full well that when they see the size of the opposition, the sight is likely 'to pluck their hearts from them'.

Well, like brave King Harry, it's time to face up to the strength of the opposition.

The aim of this short chapter is to be honest about the many strong objections that have been made to the claim that God's love is a *just* love—that he must punish sin. I want to state them as clearly and fairly as possible, and then to suggest how the rest of the book will address these objections.

The main objections are these: First, God is love. Second, he can simply write-off sin like a debt. Third, for him to punish just because someone ‘deserves it’ seems pointless.

### **God is love**

‘God *must* punish sin.’ How could anyone say such a thing? God is love. Is a loving God going to subject people he created to pain and suffering? Can we imagine a God who is love being determined to exercise *vengeance or retribution*?

This is probably the most emotive objection. The author of a recent book argues that the rhetoric of judgement and punishment in Christian teaching has masked the fact that God *defines* himself as love. It is indeed true that John categorically states ‘God is love’ in the first of his letters in the New Testament. We’re going to think about that at greater length in the next chapter, but if ‘God is love’ means that God is ‘love only’, then we have the ultimate rebuttal to the claim that God must punish sin. Surely, if God *defines* himself as love—not anger, power or judgment, but *love*—then that *must* over-ride everything else? Everything in the Bible must be read, tempered, understood and interpreted through the ‘lens’ that God is love. Anything that might suggest his determination to punish sin has to be seen against his *greater* determination to act in love.

### **Sin can be written-off like a debt**

The second objection is more subtle: We claim that God must punish sin. But surely, many people will say, it is God’s right *not* to punish sin. Why can he not just let people off? To say that God *must* punish sin sounds very much like God is obliged by something or someone else to punish sin. If so, what is it? Why

does it have the authority to compel God to act a certain way?

Or the objection can be put more positively: Rather than thinking of God as being at the mercy of some mechanical, impersonal relationship between sin and punishment, isn't it better to think about sin in a more relational way? A recent official document from one the major denominations put it like this: The authors say that our best instincts should lead us to 'personal analogies' to make best sense of the how God deals with sin. Analogies such as, 'Loving parents will often waive a debt owed to them by a child'.\*

So, the objection goes, isn't it better to think of God as a creditor with the absolute right to cancel the debt of our sin? Surely, when God 'forgives' us, two things are going on. On the one hand, we the debtors are freed from obligation. On the other, God the creditor does not want to receive what we owe. Now God does forgive, we know that for sure. But since, as he forgives us, he doesn't want to receive what we owe, since he has chosen not to, where's the sense in the notion that he must punish us?

### **What's the point of punishment?**

The final major objection to the claim that God must punish sin asks us to think about the *purpose* of punishment. While the feeling that someone simply 'deserves' to be punished is obviously a common one, what does that actually mean? It might make us feel better to act in vengeance or retribution when it seems someone 'deserves' to be punished, but what does that actually achieve? And how can it be said to achieve justice?

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\* *The Mystery of Salvation: The Story of God's Gift*, a Report by the Doctrine Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England (London, Church House Publishing, 1995), page 212.

Like the others, this is a deeply held objection for some people. Indeed, it is so deeply held in academic circles that very little credence is given any more to the idea of punishment as retribution. If punishment has any purpose, so it is said, it is to deter other potential offenders. Or it is to rehabilitate the offender.

So, to put the objection another way, to say that 'God must punish sin' implies that he punishes merely because they 'deserve it'. But not only does this seem cold and mechanical, it is also purposeless and at odds with any well-respected understanding of punishment today. And punishment seems especially purposeless when we talk about punishing people whom most of us would regard as essentially 'good' people. What's the point of that?

### **Marshalling a response**

If you strongly object to the claim that God's love is a *just* love, that he *must* punish sin, then I may not have yet quite managed to articulate your particular objection. But I think you'll agree that I have raised a formidable number to deal with.

I am going to deal with these objections by pursuing a series of related *arguments*. These are not arguments plucked from thin air. They come from what God says in the Bible about himself and the world we live in.

Arguments can sometimes seem cold and hard, like the logic of *Star Trek's* Dr Spock, but there's no reason why argument should have to displace passion, feeling and emotion. I am aiming to *persuade* you about something. And not just persuade your mind, but also your heart and emotions (if such things are separable, which I'm not sure they are).