

For Meditation and Self-reflection

1 John 4:7-8 *“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”*

The one belief that sums up the main teaching of nearly every world religion is that God is loving by nature. This is especially true of Christianity. According to the Bible, God is not only loving, but is the very personification of love.

Oddly, the God of the Bible sometimes seems to act in ways that are inconsistent with a loving nature. God’s judgments are viewed by some as unduly harsh and unfair. However, if you dig a little deeper into the historical context of those judgments, and carefully and accurately translate the original documents, an interesting picture emerges. God’s judgments are always followed by mercy, forgiveness, and restoration. What we need to realize is that no matter how harsh God’s judgments might seem on the surface, they are motivated by love.

One of the most common complaints of young children is that they are being treated “unfairly” by their parents when they are disciplined, or when they don’t get their way in a given circumstance. One of the most common phrases coming from the lips of children is “That’s not fair!” Of course, we know that this attitude is childish. As children mature, they begin to realize that their parents really do love them, after all, and that parental discipline is actually a form of tough love.

God’s loving discipline for His children takes two forms. The first is that which occurs by God’s direct hand. The second is the natural law of sowing and reaping, which is impartially meted out to all humankind. The purpose of God’s tough love is to mold us into the likeness of Christ. God loves us all, without exception, and wants all of us to develop into productive and happy citizens of both this world and the next.

So, when interpreting and applying the difficult Scriptural passages dealing with God’s harsh judgments, ask yourself this question about each of them. *“In what way can I interpret this passage that is consistent with God’s loving nature?”* For example, one might conclude that a passage is not meant to be historically or literally true, and an allegorical interpretation might be in order. The “fires” of Hell would be symbolic of the refining fires of a crucible in which an individual is

cleansed and purified. Or one might conclude that a particular judgement is not permanent or final, but instead a means to an eventual happy ending.

Many negative words used to describe God's judgments in the Bible can be accurately understood in ways that are consistent with God's love. For example, the Greek word translated "*eternal*" literally means "*age-during*," not "*forever*." The word translated "*death*" in some contexts literally means "*lost*," not "*doomed to eternity in Hell*."

When we look at the Bible in this way, in both the Old and New Testaments, a pattern consistently emerges. The judgments of God are followed by mercy, forgiveness, and restoration. God is love, and everything that God does to us and for us is motivated by love. No matter how harsh God's judgments might appear on the surface, in the end, love always wins.