

The Christian Perception of God

God has been given many different faces, among these there are two extremes.

There is the tradition that God has an angry face.

God is portrayed as disgusted and at the end of His patience.

This is the so-called “*fire and brimstone*” tradition that is based on the “*wrath of God*”.

A person approaches this God in fear.

A less provoking and more recent tradition makes God a type of “*uncle pockets*” God.

This God is pleasant, bland and slightly wimpish.

This God asks nothing of us, but invites us to have a good time in life, as long as what we are doing doesn't visibly hurt anyone else.

Genesis 1:27 [NIV] “*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*”

God's Word tells us that God made human beings in His image, but **too often we seek to make God in our human image.**

[By the way, the Hebrew word translated image in Genesis means “*a shadow*” not the real thing.]

Whatever our personal perception of God is we are mistaken.

How can I say this?

1. God is infinite so nothing that our finite minds visualise can totally depict God.
2. God is definitely a God of mystery because He is far beyond anything we can imagine.

Humans want a God that we can fit snugly into our finite little minds, and because we find this impossible it rankles us.

The apostle John chooses dynamic rather than static words to describe and define God.

1 John 4:8 [NIV] “*Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.*”

John did **not** say that God has love but God is love.

Love is the very nature of God, God always acts in a loving way.

In the real sense this is all that God can do because this is His nature.

Romans 1:20 [NIV] “*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.*”

God's Word, the Christian Bible, encourages us to look at the physical creation to receive a limited picture of spiritual principles.

A good analogy or comparison will help us.

It is the nature of the sun to give off warmth and light.

The sun always radiates warmth and light.

We can choose to stand in the warmth of the sun and for it to give us illumination in our life.

Even in the darkness of night the sun can give us limited illumination as its light is reflected by the moon.

However, we can choose to separate ourselves from the warmth and illumination of the sun.

Whatever we choose to do the sun does **not** change, it goes on radiating warmth and light.

The same is with God's Love.

We are as human beings free to choose to separate ourselves from God's Love.

Romans 5:8 [NIV] *“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

Even when we cut ourselves off from God, turning our back on Him by our sins, God still continues to love us.

God still invites us to return the warmth of His Love.

In a sense we can refuse the love of God but we can never lose the love of God.

Luke 15:11-24 [NIV] *“Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no-one gave him anything. “**When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’** So he got up and went to his father. “**But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.** “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ “**But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’** So they began to celebrate.”*

This parable of the prodigal son tells us that the father [God] allows his son to leave but he patiently waits longing for his son to return.

When the son does return, his life and fortunes in a shambles, the father runs down the road to warmly embrace his returning son. The father then arranges a party to celebrate the return of his lost son.

God's Love for human beings is an unconditional covenant, not a contractual covenant.

An unconditional covenant is a promise that is never cancelled, no matter what the response of the other party involved in that covenant.

John 3:16-17 [NIV] *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. **For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.**”*

This love contract is **not** a judgemental conditional contract, and is made with every human being.

In our human experience there is very little for us to understand this kind of unconditional love that God has for us all.

Isaiah 49:15-16 [NIV] *“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, **I will not forget you!** See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.”*

It is far beyond the love that a mother can ever have for her own child.

Hebrews 13:5 [NIV] *“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, **“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”**”*

God promises never to leave us or forget us.

What about the wrath of God?

It would be seriously misleading to imply that God gets angry because of something we have done.

If that were true, we would be in control of God’s reactions, which is unthinkable.

Matthew 5:43-45 [NIV] *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: **Love your enemies** and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”*

It is also impossible to consider that Jesus who is the Son of God tells us to love our enemies, and forgive them without limit. Would He then tell us that God the Father will be angry if we sin and become an enemy of God?

Almost all of our experience of human love is conditional love. *“If you do this then I will love you.”*

The “*wrath of God*” mentioned in scripture is a figure of speech, for there is no wrath **in** God.

The figure of speech is called an anthropomorphism, where human reactions are ascribed to God’s reactions.

In this figure of speech it is intended to emphasise the incompatibility of a God who is love to sin.

Our sinning does **not** change God or arouse wrath in Him.

What about the punishments and fear of God?

Does God punish?

Scripture does **not** show a vindictive God who punishes sinners to get even with them.

Scripture does however show that we punish ourselves by our actions.

When we leave the sunlight of God’s Love, we grow dark and cold; this is self-inflicted punishment.

All human beings are free to make their own choices.

We can choose to reject God and the offer of love and cut ourselves off from God.

Isaiah 59:1-2 [NIV] *“Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.”*

If we choose to perform unloving acts [sin] we choose to cut ourselves off from God. We moved away from God, God does **not** change or move.

Matthew 27:45-46 [NIV] *“From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”, which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

It was because Jesus was at that moment of death taking on all the sins of humanity that God the Father could **not** look on Him for the first time in His human experience.

God who is pure and Holy will not look on sin.

Our sins always result in some suffering for ourselves and often for others as well.

When we leave the warmth and light of the sun, we grow dark and cold.

Still we know that the sun is **not** punishing us for our absence, it was the result of our own decision.

If we choose to be without God in our lives because we desire something more than we desire God, we will begin to hurt ourselves.

It would be unfair to say that God is hurting us.

We cannot truthfully accuse God of punishing us for our failures.

If death comes to us to finalise this choice, we can even lose God’s presence forever.

1 Timothy 2:4 [NIV] *“who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”*

It is God’s loving desire that all of us will be saved from our sins, and not be cut off from His Love forever.

True love cannot be forced, we have to choose to love another being, and that includes God.

What about the fear of God?

To me it is a logical conclusion, as a result of all that has been said, that the fear of God is **not** from the loving God, **the fear we feel is from ourselves.**

1 John 4:18 [NIV] *“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”*

God’s Love eradicates fear.

We fear the results of our own human weakness and the misuse of our freedom to make wrong choices.

I can **never** believe that the God who is love is inviting us into such a relationship.

1 John 4:19 [NIV] *“We love because he first loved us.”*

God’s Love for us generates in us a love for Him **not** a fear of Him.