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THE WRATH OF GOD

Wrath, anger, and indignation are integral to the biblical proclamation of the living God in His opposition to sin. While God's love is spontaneous to His own being, His wrath is called forth by the wickedness of His creatures. Thus it is the wounding of His gracious love, the rejection of His proffered mercy, which evokes His holy wrath. God's act of wrath is His strange work (Isaiah 28:21).

Wrath is the effect of human sin: mercy is not the effect of human goodness, but is inherent in the character of God."

The wrath of God is not an impersonal retribution, an automatic, and causal working out of an abstract law. In the OT wrath is the expression of the personal, subjective free will of Yahweh who actively punishes sin, as in the NT it is the personal reaction of God, not an independent hypostasis. In the face of evil the Holy One of Israel does not dodge the responsibility of executing judgment.

He demonstrates His anger at times in the most personal way possible. "I the Lord do smite" (Ezekiel 7:8-9). In such NT passages as John 3:36; Romans 1:18; Ephesians 5:6; Colossians 3:6; Revelation 19:15; 11:18; 14:10; 16:19; 6:16; Romans 9:22, wrath is specifically described as God's wrath, His wrath, thy wrath, or the wrath of the Lamb.

The wrath of God is being continually revealed from heaven, actively giving the wicked up to uncleanness, to vile passions, to reprobate minds, and punishing them in the day of wrath and revelation of the just judgment of God (Romans 1:18-2:6). In 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 Paul writes as personal a description of the Lord Jesus' action in directly punishing the disobedient as can be penned.

In the total biblical portrayal the wrath of God is not so much an emotion or an angry frame of mind as it is the settled opposition of His holiness to evil. Accordingly, the wrath of God is seen in its effects, in God's punishment of sin in this life and in the next. These inflictions include pestilence, death, exile, destruction of wicked cities and nations, hardening of hearts, and the cutting off of the people of God for idolatry or unbelief. They reach into the life to come in Jesus' descriptions of everlasting punishment, of a hell of fire, where the worm dies not and the flame is not quenched.

The day of wrath is God's final judgment against sin, his irrevocable condemnation of impenitent sinners. The OT description of God as "slow to anger and plenteous in mercy" is best understood as a blessed revelation full of wonder and awe.

For only He who apprehends the reality of God's wrath is overpowered by the magnitude of His mercy, as it is declared in Isaiah 54:7-10 or in the reading of Psalm 30:5: "His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for a lifetime." As mercy gets the upper hand in these OT passages, so the ultimate NT word is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father made ours in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Accordingly, the way of escape from the wrath of the Almighty is abundantly presented in both testaments. While man's puny efforts are insufficient, God's own heart of love provides a way of salvation. He calls men to turn back, to return unto Him, to receive His forgiveness and renewal. He

receives the intercession of His servants, Abraham, Moses, Ελεαζαρ, and Jeremiah, for His people, and He provides the OT sacrificial system by which His wrath may be averted.

In the NT the call is to faith, to repentance, to baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus who saves us from the wrath to come (I Thessalonians 1:9-10). For when we are justified by His blood and reconciled by His death we shall be saved from the wrath by His life (Rom. 5:9-10). The most poignant word about God's punishment is that it is the wrath of the Lamb who took upon himself and bore the sins of the world.

Text: It is plain from the Bible that sin will be punished (Daniel 12:2; Matthew 10:15; John 5:28-29; Romans 5:12-21), and the duration of this punishment is sometimes expressed in the NT by the use of αἰον or one of its derivatives (Matthew 18:8; 25:41, 46; 2 Thessalonians 1:9). Αἰον means "an age," and it was used of the never ending "age to come," which gave to the corresponding adjective αἰωνιον the meaning "eternal," "everlasting." These words are used of "the King of ages" (1 Timothy 1:17), of "the eternal God" (Romans 16:26), and when glory is ascribed to God "for ever" (Romans 11:36) and God is blessed "for ever" (2 Corinthians 11:31). The concept of endless duration could not be more strongly conveyed; the use of these expressions for the eternity of God shows conclusively that they do not mean limited duration. It is important that the same adjective is used of eternal punishment as of eternal life (Matthew 25:46 has both). The punishment is just as eternal as the life. The one is no more limited than the other.

A similar idea is conveyed by the use of other terminology. Thus Jesus said, "It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire" (Mark 9:43; Luke 3:17). He referred to "hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:47-48). He spoke of fearing God because He, "after He has killed, has power to cast into hell" (Luke 12:5).

He said that there is a sin that "will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come" (Matthew 12:32). Similarly John writes, "He who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him" (John 3:36). The awful finality of Christ's warnings implies permanence. He spoke of the door being shut (Matthew 25:10), of being "thrown into the outer darkness" (Matthew 8:12; "thrust out," Luke 13:28), of an impassable gulf (Luke 16:26). It is not always realized that Jesus spoke of hell more often than did anyone else in the NT. And nowhere is there a hint of any possible reversal of the last judgment.

More could be cited. And against the strong body of NT teaching that there is a continuing punishment of sin we cannot put one saying, which speaks plainly of an end to the punishment of the finally impenitent.

Those who look for a different teaching in the NT must point to possible inferences and alternative interpretations. But if Jesus wished to teach something other than eternal retribution, it is curious that He has not left one saying, which plainly says so.

In the light of the cross we can be sure that the mercy of God reaches as far as mercy can reach. God does all that can be done for man's salvation. Beyond that, and the teaching of the permanence of the doom of the wicked, we cannot go. It may be that the dread reality is other than men have usually pictured it. It must be borne in mind that Scripture uses symbolic terms of necessity to refer to realities beyond the grave.

The imagery Christians have tended to stress is that of "the hell of fire" (Matthew 5:22). But there are references also to "the unquenchable fire" (Mark 9:43), "the outer darkness" (Matthew 8:12), the "worm"

that "does not die" (Mark 9:48), weeping and gnashing of teeth (Luke 13:28), "the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:29), "being sentenced to hell" (more literally, "the judgment of hell," Matthew 23:33), receiving "a severe beating" (Luke 12:47; or being "beaten with many stripes,") being "lost" (Matthew 10:6), "perishing" (I Corinthians 1:18), death (Romans 6:23), losing the life (Luke 9:24).

With such a variety of terms, it is unwise to press one as though that gave the complete picture. We should beware of oversimplifying; it is impossible to visualize what the reality is which can be described so variously. But we should beware also of yielding to the sentimental demand that we water down such expressions. That there is a grim reality Scripture leaves us in no doubt.

But from early days some Christians have rejected this teaching and taught that all will finally be saved. And in this century universalism is widely accepted. The basic reason is that it is not easy to reconcile the idea of hell with the love of God.

If we are to be true to the whole teaching of Scripture, we must come to the conclusion that the ultimate fate of the wicked is eternal punishment, though we must add that we have no way of knowing in exactly what that punishment consists.

Because we are born in sin and therefore cannot live up to God's righteous standards, condemnation (damnation, the older synonym, has other connotations today) hangs over our (2 Peter 2:3; Romans 1:18; Ephesians 5:5-6; Colossians 3:5-6). God Himself is the one who condemns (Job 10:2; Jeremiah 42:18; John 12:48).

His judgment is based on his justice, and such condemnation is deserved (I Kings 8:32; Romans 3:8; Galatians 1:8-9). Condemnation comes to the wicked and unrepentant (Matthew 12:41-42; Luke 11:31-32; John 5:29; Romans 5:16, 18; 2 Thessalonians 2:12; Revelation 19:2) and results in eternal punishment (Matthew 23:33), but no OT believer who trusted in God (Psalm 34:22) or NT believer who trusts in Christ (John 3:18; 5:24) will be condemned. Jesus came to save rather than to condemn (John 3:17), and He frees us from final condemnation (Romans 8:1-2).

Conscience may cause us to condemn ourselves (I John 3:19-21), but no one can justly condemn the righteous if God is on his side (Isaiah 50:9; Titus 2:7-8).

In fact, the Lord prevents or reverses unfair condemnation by our enemies (Psalms 37:33; 79:11; 102:19-20; 109:31). Self-righteous people should avoid condemning others (Job 32:3; Luke 6:37; Romans 8:34; 14:3) because quickness to condemn may recoil on their own heads (Job 15:6; Psalm 34:21; Luke 6:37; Romans 2:1; Titus 3:10-11).

Needless to say, it is the height of arrogance and folly for sinful people to condemn a just and omnipotent God (Job 34:17, 29; 40:8).

Divine judgment is God's method of displaying His mercy as well as His wrath toward individuals and nations (Exodus 6:6, 7:4; Ecclesiastes 3:17; 12:14; Daniel 7:22; Joel 3:2; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

As God is the one who condemns, so also He is the true and only Judge (Genesis 18:25; Psalm 82:1; Ecclesiastes 11:9), an office and function shared by the Father (Genesis 31:53; John 8:50; Romans 3:6) and the Son (Acts 10:42; 17:31; Romans 2:16).

Retributive or negative judgment is a direct result of sin (I Samuel 3:13; Ezekiel 7:3, 8, 27; Romans 2:12; Jude 14-15) and is therefore both just (Ezekiel 33:20; 2 Timothy 4:8; I Peter 2:23) and deserved (Psalms 94:2; 143:2; Ezekiel 18:30).

Rewarding or positive judgment relates to the believer's stewardship of his talents and gifts and is therefore characterized by divine compassion (Matthew 25:14-23; I Corinthians 3:12-15; I Peter 1:17). Although we experience judgment initially in this life, all of us are judged ultimately after death (Isaiah 66:16; Jeremiah 25:31; Joel 3:12; John 12:48; Acts 17:31; Romans 2:16; Revelation 20:12-13) at the judgment seat of God (Romans 14:10) or Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Self-judgment, another manifestation of the same activity, is brought about by rebellion and willfulness (Romans 13:2; I Corinthians 11:29; I Timothy 5:12).

It is not only human beings who are judged, however, God also judges other gods, real or imagined (Exodus 12:12; Numbers 33:4; Jeremiah 10:14-15), and angels as well (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6).

The devil himself is not exempt from such judgment (I Timothy 3:6). And although in the final analysis God is the only judge, he has chosen to allow us to participate with Christ in judging the world (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30; I Corinthians 6:2; Revelation 20:4), including the angels (I Corinthians 6:3).

The story of Noah's flood contains several principles concerning divine judgment that are worth careful consideration.

God's judgments are never arbitrary. Man's sin is God's sorrow (Genesis 6:5-6). The Lord is not capricious when He judges. He makes a considered and deliberate decision before unleashing his punishment.

God can be counted on always to judge sin (Genesis 6:7). No sin escapes His notice; His judgment on sin is inevitable (Romans 2:3; Hebrews 9:27-27).

God always announces judgment beforehand (Genesis 6:13). He informs us that our evil deeds are condemned by Him and will be judged by Him.

God always gives sinners an opportunity to repent before judging them (see Acts 17:30-31; Romans 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). There was a period of 120 years of grace for the people of Noah's day (Genesis 6:3).

God always follows through on His decision to judge (Genesis 7:4, 12, 23), once He has announced it and once people have had an opportunity to repent. His judgments are irreversible.

God's judgments always lead to death (Jeremiah 51:18; Hosea 6:5). Genesis 7:17-24, the only paragraph in the flood narrative that does not contain the name of God, reeks with the smell of death. When judgment results in death, God is no longer there.

God's judgments always include elements of both justice and grace. Though the story of the flood begins with judgment, it ends with redemption; though it begins with a curse (Genesis 6:7), it ends with a covenant (9:11).

If judgment always issues life Judgment is never God's last or best word to those who believe in Him, because "mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13).