

The Wrath of God

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Can you recall the last time you preached on the wrath of God? Probably not. But most likely you will have no difficulty remembering your last sermon on God's love. How come? Is the wrath of God something incompatible with the Christian doctrine of God? Is the idea not usable in modern theology, as Helmer Ringgren has put it?[1] Is "the notion of the affection of wrath on God" without any "religious worth for Christians?"[2] Isn't the idea of an angry and wrathful God a rather pre-Christian or even pagan concept that does not fit with the view of God that Jesus Christ has given us Himself? Is divine wrath representative of the Old Testament way of thinking? Does it have no relevance for a Christian and therefore should be avoided in our preaching, teaching, and evangelism?[3] Should we abandon the concept of wrath in favor of the grace and love of God? Is God's love and His wrath a contradiction that cannot be reconciled?

Indeed, what does the Bible teach about God's wrath?

The Old Testament often speaks of the wrath of God. According to J. Fichtner, of the 455 Old Testament references for wrath in noun form, 375 speak of the wrath of God, and the rest speak of the wrath of human beings.[4] The New Testament neither discontinues nor abandons the concept of the divine wrath.[5] The wrath of God remains a foundational element in the New Testament proclamation of the good news of God-whether it is by John the Baptist (Matt. 3:7), or by our Lord Himself,[6] or by Paul (Rom. 1:18; 5:8-11), or as part of the triumphant scenes of Revelation (Rev. 6:16, 17).[7]

Anthropomorphism?

Why, then, this neglect of the doctrine of the wrath of God? Two possible reasons may be considered. First, the suggestion that the phrase reflects an anthropomorphism—a figure of speech that attributes to God human characteristics. Such attribution, it is claimed, reduces God to our finite and sinful ways of understanding and thereby dishonors Him by adapting Him to fit our human concepts. Although this line of objection became prominent particularly in the course and aftermath of the Enlightenment, it is an old argument.[8] From very early times it was felt that God cannot experience feelings. The dignity of God required the absence of emotions. Wrath was not only an emotion, but a sign of weakness. Consider, for example, the god of Greek philosophy. He is *nous*, the mind; the essence of his being is thinking.[9] He is above joy and sorrow.[10] Aristotle identifies such a deity as the first cause, the one who has the capacity to move all things but who himself remains unmoved. His only activity is thinking.[11] He has no pathos.[12] These Greek ideas influenced the early Church Fathers and had a lasting impact upon Christian theology.[13]

In contrast to this view, the God of the Bible is full of feelings. He cares for His people. He is involved in human history and is affected by human acts. Paul Althaus has pointed out that the wrath of God is no more anthropomorphic than is God's love![14] If one rejects God's wrath, one must also reject His love, because the denial of either, in effect, destroys the personal character of God. The Old Testament—which speaks so much about the "hiddenness," the distance, and the unapproachableness of God—speaks also in tangible terms about God's acting and being.

Biblical ontology does not separate being from doing. What *is* acts. The God of the Bible is a mighty God, active in His love to save sinners, and active in His wrath to oppose everything that threatens His dominion and saving purpose. To deprive God of His willful, active, living way of being, as the Bible testifies on every page, is to destroy His personal character. Just as God's love is greater than our imperfect love, His wrath is free from any

sinful imperfection that accompanies human anger so often.

Furthermore, the idea of divine wrath shows that humanity is relevant to God. God is concerned about humankind. Hence He commands and forbids, admonishes and commends, seeks and rejects. He is an angry and a "jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments" (Ex. 20:5, 6). Since humanity is created in the image of God, there is a certain *theomorphic anthropology*. Thus, it is perhaps more proper to describe the wrath of God as theomorphic rather than anthropomorphic.

Only and Old Testament concept?

The second reason for the neglect of the wrath of God in Christian preaching is the idea that it is only an Old Testament concept. However, textual evidence in the New Testament argues strongly against any such view. Jesus,[15] John the Baptist,[16] Paul,[17] and John in his Gospel[18] and in Revelation[19] preach a gospel that includes the proclamation of the wrath of God. Nowhere does the New Testament replace God's wrath with His love;[20] instead, it views wrath as an essential and indispensable trait of God; it presents God not only as saving Lord but also as judge who brings with Him the judgment of His wrath. The good news of the Bible is not that there is no wrath of God, but that humankind is saved from wrath through faith in Jesus Christ: "But God demonstrates His own love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by his blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him" (Rom. 5:8, 9). Therefore, we "wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:10).

In the New Testament, then, God's wrath is never seen as an inconsistent relic of Old Testament religion. Biblical facts do not permit compartmentalizing the wrath of God as

belonging to the Old Testament and the love of God as belonging to the New Testament. Both the Testaments speak overwhelmingly about love and the wrath of God.[21] In fact, as Tasker concludes, the idea of the wrath of God is one of many factors that point to the inner unity of both Old and New Testament theology.[22]

Another significant point on the biblical understanding of God's wrath is found in the words used. The New Testament and the Septuagint never use the terms of the Greek poetry for the implacable wrath of the gods (*menis* and *xolos*), but use *orge* (wrath) and *thumos* (anger, wrath). This seems to indicate that the biblical authors did not associate God's wrath with an eternal hostility between God and humanity because they knew about God's love, which wants to save mankind.[23] The same understanding of God's wrath can be seen in the Old Testament.[24]

Wrath is not wrathful

However, misconceptions of the wrath of God have led to a false picture of God. One such is reading into the phrase "wrath of God" the idea of a "wrathful" or "angry" God. The picture changes dramatically: here God is seen as stern and cruel, a mean Judge who loves to revenge and punish humankind whenever there is an opportunity to do so, at times even arbitrarily.[25] Such a picture of God, however, is a grave distortion of His character and often leads to fear or reward-motivated obedience, disconnected from love.

The Bible of course, makes it very clear that the wrath of God is not the last horizon. God is love (1 John 4:16).[26] He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but is pleased when they turn from their sinful ways and live (Eze. 18:23). God wants all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the saving truth (1 Tim. 2:4-6). Reconciliation has its starting point in God! He wants the world to be reconciled with Him in Christ (2 Cor. 5:18-21; Rom. 5:8-11). He does not desire revengeful punishment. In fact, judgment is God's "strange work" (Isa. 28:21). Within the context of biblical judgment, divine wrath is not an expression of a

despotic deity, but a just and legitimate reaction against the sinfulness of sin. God's wrath is neither capricious nor arbitrary.[27] It is aroused against sin, because sin is a rebellion against God's nature and character. But even in His wrath God remembers mercy (Isa. 54:7, 8); His anger lasts only for a moment (Ps. 30:5); and for His own namesake He does not execute it to the fullest (Isa. 48:9). Through a manifestation of His anger God wants men and women to come to their senses and turn from their evil conduct (Jer. 36:7; Isa. 42:25; 12:1). Therefore, it is wrong and irresponsible to take the wrath of God and paint a picture of fear in the minds of people.

Take, for example, the coming judgment. It is a serious affair and must not be passed over. However, if the preaching of judgment produces only a sense of fear, we are pointing not to the Coming One, but to the coming things. The emphasis is different. It seems to me that our task should be not so much the description of God's terrible judgment, but rather the necessity of people turning to Jesus Christ, who is our judge as well as Saviour.

Implications

A biblical understanding of the wrath of God leads to several important consequences and implications. First, as noted already, all preaching of the good news, from the prophets in the Old Testament to Jesus and the apostles in the New, begins with the proclamation of the wrath of God. This approach destroys all self-righteousness and all self-made religious ideologies, and the sinner stands facing the reality of the *living* and *holy* God.

Second, the wrath of God notifies that God takes sin seriously. God's wrath reveals the detestable nature of sin on the one hand and God's aversion to it on the other. Sin is incompatible with God's holiness.[28] Holiness (Hebrew *qadosh*, to separate) distinguishes God from every other form of existence and is an undergirding factor in the plan of salvation. The wrath of God teaches us that He is deeply and personally involved in the struggle with evil and that He is capable of reacting in the strongest possible way.

Third, an awareness of the wrath of God creates new appreciation for God's love. Sin has placed us in opposition to God. By nature we are objects of His wrath (Eph. 2:3). Justice demands that we receive our punishment, death. And yet God has loved us while we were still His enemies (Rom. 5:8-10). He has so loved us that He made our redemption possible by the death of His Son. His love and mercy gains new depth and meaning when placed against the background of what we deserve!

Fourth, to deny the wrath in God is to paralyze God's rulership: a surrender of God to the powers of evil who aim at the destruction of God's creation. Would God be morally just if He could not react against evil in this world? Would God be holy and loving if He could not detest sin and react against it? Would God be a redeemer if He were forced to compromise with evil?

Fifth, the wrath of God shows that God views my individual decision seriously. If I choose to live without God, He does not overrule my decision, but lets me meet the consequences of my choice. (cf. Rom. 1:18 ff).

Finally, God's wrath shows that guilt is more than merely a subjective feeling. Sin requires expiation. Between the wrath of God and the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross there exists a close relationship. The New Testament brings this out very clearly in its usage of different words for reconciliation, as Heppenstall points out. "They [the words for reconciliation] give clear expression to the inevitable opposition of God to sin, to the fact that there exists a real problem for God that must be resolved, that there is in the divine administration of the world and the universe a necessity-that when sin is forgiven, it is forgiven in such a way as to make clear the necessity for God to execute judgment on sin." [29]

God's wrath, then, is not an embarrassment to be avoided in our preaching. It is the biblical way of proclaiming God's utter opposition to sin. It tells me that God takes sin seriously and wants to bring it to an end. It creates in me a new appreciation for the cross. It

helps me better understand the nature of Christ's intercessory ministry in heaven and the nature of His final judgment. It builds my confidence in God and gives me grace and assurance to await the final outcome of His purposes at the Second Coming.

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- [1]. Helmer Ringgren, "Einige Schilderungen des göttlichen Zorns," in *Tradition und Situation. Schilderungen zur alttestamentlichen Prophetie. Festschrift für Arthur Weiser* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1963), p. 107.
- [2]. Albrecht Ritschl, *Die Christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung* (Bonn: 1882), p. 154; cf. The English translation *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation: The Positive Development of the Doctrine*, trans. and ed. H.R. Mackintosh and A.B. Macaulay (Clifton, N.Y.: Reference Book Pub., 1966); Nicolas Berdyaev goes even further, saying that "anger in every shape and form is foreign to God" (Nicolas Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, trans. O.F. Clarke [New York: Scribner's and Sons, 1936], p. 175).
- [3]. This was the conviction of Friedrich Schleiermacher, who expressed his ideas in a sermon entitled: "Dass wir nichts vom Zorne Gottes zu lehren haben," in Hayo Gerdes and Emanuel Hirsch, eds., *Dogmatische Predigten der Reifezeit, Kleine Schriften und Predigten* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1969), pp. 123-135.
- [4]. J. Fichtner, "The Wrath of God," in G. Friedrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), vol. 5, p. 395, note 92. (Hereafter cited as *TDNT*.)
- [5]. For a more in-depth discussion of the concept of the wrath of God in the New Testament, see G. Bornkamn, *Early Christian Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969); H. Conzelmann, "Zorn Gottes, III. In Judentum und NT," in K. Gallig, ed., *RGG*, 3rd rev. ed. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1962), vol. 6, pp. 1931, 1932; A. Diekmann, "Die Christliche Lehre vom Zorne Gottes nebst Kritik der betreffenden Lehre A. Ritschl's," *Zeitschrift für Wissenschaftliche Theologie* 36, No. 2 (1893): 321-377; G.H.C. MacGregor, "The concept of the Wrath of God in the New Testament," *New Testament Studies* 7 (1960/1961): 101-109; D. G. Schrenk, *Unser Glaube and den Zorn Gottes nach dem Römerbrief* (Basel: Verlag von H. Majer, 1947); G. Stahlin, "The Wrath of Man and the Wrath of God in the New Testament," *TDNT*, vol. 5, pp. 419-447; R.V.G. Tasker, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God* (London: Tyndale Press, 1951).
- [6]. "When we consider carefully the evidence of the Gospels, it is clear that the revelation of the wrath of God in Jesus Christ is in fact to be found as part both of His prophetic and His priestly ministry" (Tasker, p. 28).
- [7]. Cf. X. Leon-Dufour, *Wörterbuch zur Biblischen Botschaft* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), p. 805; Walter Künneth, *Fundamente des Glaubens'* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus Verlag, 1980), p. 71.
- [8]. Cf. the through study by Max Pohlenz, *Vom Zorne Gottes. Eine Studie über den Einfluss der Griechischen Philosophie au das alte Christentum*, FRLANT (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1909), vol. 12, pp. 3-9.
- [9]. Plato, *Philebus* 22c, 28c; *Phaedrus* 247d.
- [10]. Plato, *Philebus* 33b; *Republic* 2. 377e.
- [11]. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1178b.
- [12]. For an excellent description on the Greek philosophy of pathos and its implications, see Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962), pp. 247-306.
- [13]. Pohlenz, pp. 16-156.
- [14]. Paul Althaus, *Die Christliche Wahrheit. Lehrbuch der Dogmatisch* (Gutersloh: Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1969), p. 397.
- [15]. Even though express reference to Jesus and wrath is rare, "wrath is an integral characteristic of the Jesus of the Gospels." (G. Stahlin, "The Wrath of Man and the Wrath of God in the New Testament," in *TDNT*, vol. 5, p. 427. Cf. Mark 3:5; 1:41, 43; Matt.9:30; John 11:33, 38).

- [16]. Cf. Matt. 3:7.
- [17]. Cf. Rom. 1:18; 2:5, 8; 5:9; 12:19; 13:4, 5; Eph. 2:3; 5:6; Col. 3:6; 1 Thess. 1:10; 2:16; 5:9; Heb. 2:2-3; 10:26-31.
- [18]. Cf. John 3:36.
- [19]. Cf. Rev. 6:16, 17; 11:18; 14:10, 19; 15:1; 16:1; 19:15.
- [20]. Cf. Conzelmann, p. 1931.
- [21]. "In point of fact, however, the Hebrew Scriptures (partly because they make up three fourths of the Bible) contain far more verses on the mercy and lovingkindness of God than the New Testament does" (Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982], p. 309).
- [22]. Tasker, p. 45.
- [23]. Cf. H. Kleinknecht, "Wrath in Classical Antiquity," *TDNT*, vol. 5, pp. 383-392.
- [24]. Cf. J. Bergmann and E. Johnson, "'anaph, 'aph,'" in G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), vol. 1, pp. 348-360.
- [25]. Some, like Democrit, have seen the fear of God as the origin of religion. H.F. Fuhs, "jare'," in G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, eds. *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Altgen Testament* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1982), vol. 3, p. 876.
- [26]. Interestingly, nowhere in the Bible do we find the expression "God is wrath." Does this suggest that God's nature is love and that wrath is provoked only when His saving purpose is jeopardized?
- [27]. Cf. Bergmann and Johnson, pp. 348-360.
- [28]. On the relation of God's wrath and God's holiness, cf. Emil Brunner. *The Christian Doctrine of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), pp. 157-174.
- [29]. E. Heppenstall, "Subjective and Objective Aspects of the Atonement," in *The Sanctuary and the Atonement. Biblical, Historical, and Theological Studies* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1981), p. 686.