

The Wrath Of God

Nobody wants to be an object of wrath, much less of God's wrath. I understand why people feel uneasy about the subject. Because of the moral and spiritual condition of the human race we all deserve and are by nature objects of God's wrath (Eph. 2:3). We live in an age of sentimentalism and permissiveness that makes it difficult to accept the reality of the wrath of God. Consequently some tend to redefine it by emphasizing that God is by nature love and by implying that God's love and His wrath are incompatible. But the reality of God's wrath cannot be deleted from the Scripture. We should keep that in mind when discussing this important topic.

1. Divine Wrath and Human Anger:

Human anger cannot be used as a model for the interpretation and understanding of God's wrath. Our anger is irrational and damaging to us and to others. It expresses our lack of self-control, or our lack of dominion over our emotions, and reveals our desire to control others at almost any cost. It is an expression of the damage and unbalance to our inner being caused by sin that make it impossible for us to co-exist with others in a harmonious relationship. God's wrath is untouched by sin and, therefore, under the controlling power of love. It is primarily intended for healing, procuring the restoration of order within His creation (Heb. 12:6; Rev. 20:15-21:1).

2. God's Wrath and Sin:

God's wrath does not appear to be a permanent attribute of God, that is to say something that by nature constantly characterizes Him and His actions. Since His wrath is not irrational, there's always a reason for it or something that provokes it (Deut. 4:24). It is provoked by sin, and it is fundamentally His reaction to the irrational presence of sin and evil in the life of His creatures and in the world (Rom. 1:18). Therefore His wrath is momentary, coming to an end once its good purpose is achieved. Contrast that with His love that endures forever (Isa. 54:8).

3. God's Wrath Is Eschatological:

Since God's wrath is a manifestation of His willingness to restore the world to order, harmony, and justice, it is fundamentally an eschatological event (Rom. 2:5; Rev. 16). It can be properly referred to as God's "strange work" (Isa. 28:21). At that eschatological moment the fullness of God's wrath is revealed (Rev. 15:1), and everyone will receive it according to their deeds. This is not self-destruction or impersonal forces acting over sinners and Satan. God is personally involved in bringing the phenomenon of sin to an end in order to restore the cosmic harmony He established in the beginning.

4. God's Wrath Within History:

Although fundamentally an eschatological event, His wrath is to some extent already present in this world (Rom. 1:18). At times it consists in handing over sinners to the power of evil (verse 28). At other times God directly intervenes and punishes unrepentant sinners (Gen. 6:17) or removes His controlling power over nature and the result is destruction and death (Gen. 19:24, 25). Those historical expressions of God's wrath set limits to the incursion of sin in society or among His people (Ex. 32:11) and are intended to be redemptive.

5. God's Wrath and Us:

God's wrath against human sin reveals His affective side. It indicates that He takes sinners seriously, that He does not ignore us even in our rebellion against Him. In other words, He takes our actions so seriously that by reacting to them with His wrath He is still showing His willingness to interact with us. Ignoring people shows disrespect and the absence of love. When God reacts to our sin, He is clearly telling us that we are important to Him, that He does not easily give us up, that the relationship is not yet over. God's love and His wrath are not incompatible.

6. God's Wrath and Salvation:

God's wrath is not the inexorable destiny of sinners unless they so choose. Jesus rescued "us from the coming wrath" (1 Thess. 1:10) by taking on Himself, as our substitute, the law's curse (Gal. 3:13). We, who have been justified by faith, have been "saved from God's wrath through him!" (Rom. 5:9). Because of Christ we are no longer children of wrath. Praise the Lord!

The Lord expressed His deep concern for sinful human beings through the proclamation of the eternal gospel, through His appeal to them to return to Him (message of the first angel), and by alerting them about the false gospel of Babylon (message of the second angel). Now God's heart opens up again, warning humanity about the fate of those who identify themselves with the dragon, hoping that they will listen and choose loyalty to the Lamb. This message takes us to the final judgment and the resolution of the cosmic conflict through the Lamb.

WE HAVE TO CHOOSE

The language and images used in the message of the third angel (Rev. 14:9-11) appear to some to be incompatible with the Christian gospel. Only a reading of the message from the perspective of the sacrificial love of the Lamb will disclose the intent of the message.

LOYALTIES

The third angel's message focuses on one of the most important questions humans face: To whom do we owe ultimate loyalty? It implies that there is a conflict and that regardless of our involvement there are sides to take. Reluctance to choose is a choice for the wrong crowd! There are only two options: the Lamb or the fallen cherub. In this conflict there is not such a thing as being loyal to ourselves.

The concept of loyalty found here is profound, for our character displays the identity of the object of our loyalty. This is what the language of bearing the name and mark of the beast indicates (Rev. 14:9, 11). Loyalty to the fallen cherub leaves a visible imprint in our lives. Having the name of the beast means that we have identified ourselves with the agenda and ambitions of the fallen cherub; we belong to him. The idea of belonging is clearly expressed through the mark of the beast. A mark of loyalty in the hand and the forehead is visible to all and reminds others that this person belongs to the fallen cherub (Ex. 13:9). The mark is a symbol of the authority of the object of our loyalty.

If we examine the history of apostate Christianity looking for a symbol of authority that would reveal one's loyalty in the conflict, it is clearly Sunday. The claim to have authority to change the law of God is unsurpassable. The authority of God, who established the seventh-day Sabbath as the day of rest and worship, was silenced by the human voice

that changed Sabbath to Sunday. The law of God will play a major role in the final conflict. Notice the connection between worship and the mark of the beast in Revelation 14:9: "If anyone worships the beast . . . and receives a mark."¹ These two elements are inseparable. Since Sunday is a day of worship, submitting to it is at the same time an act of worship. Two commandments are violated, the first and the fourth. Sunday becomes a counterfeit to the Sabbath, which is a sign of God's sanctifying authority.

WINE AND FIRE

The final fate of the wicked consists in experiencing the wrath of God. Here we confront what some would call the difficult topic of a wrathful God. John tries to explain what it is, using the metaphors of wine and fire and brimstone. These images are employed in the Old Testament to describe God's judgment against His enemies (Jer. 25:15-28; Ps. 11:6; Gen. 19:24). The language is symbolic because God's wrath is not literally drinking from a cup. In this case what matters is the type of wine the wicked will drink, for it expresses the point of the comparison. This wine was not mixed with water (as was common), but its intoxicating power was increased through the use of spices (Rev. 14:10). The wicked will experience God's wrath unmixed with mercy—there will not be room for repentance (Rev. 22:11).

The second metaphor is fire and brimstone. The wicked will be tormented with fire and brimstone, or with "burning brimstone." This metaphor compares the experience of God's wrath to the pain one feels when burning brimstone touches our body. God's wrath is a painful experience. The metaphor also builds on the fact that what is destroyed by fire cannot be recovered; it is destroyed forever. The idea is that the wrath of God will result in the final extinction of the wicked, called the second death (Rev. 20:6, 14). The fire is eternal for what it burns is eternally destroyed; it burns until nothing is left (Isa. 34:9, 10; Jude 7). While the wicked are experiencing the second death there is no rest for them.

CHRIST'S SUFFERING

The painful and final death of the wicked is something that we cannot begin to imagine, because no one has yet gone through it. The only exception was Jesus Christ, and He did it in order for us to escape from it. During the final judgment no one should go through the second death; at least there is no valid reason for this to happen. A Christ-centered view of the final judgment has to connect it with Christ's judgment on the cross. There He took upon Himself the judgment of the world (John 12:31), bore the sins of the world as a sacrificial victim (John 1:29), and drank from the cup of God's judgment against sinful humanity (John 18:11) in order for those who place their faith in Him as Savior not to perish but enjoy eternal life (John 3:16). On the cross He experienced His baptism by fire and said, "I am thirsty" (John 19:28). On the cross the Godhead suffered together. "God suffered with His Son, as the divine Being alone could suffer, in order that the world might become reconciled to Him."² The excruciating pain He felt was not so much physical but the inner pain of realizing that He was separated from the Father (Matt. 27:46). Something similar will be the fate of the wicked during the final judgment as they realize that they will be eternally separated from God.

CONCLUSION

The conflict is indeed about loyalty. The warning from God sounds threatening because of the seriousness of the situation humans will face. His transparency uncovers a heart in pain for God does not want His creatures to die. The language is the language of a sign

alerting people to stop because there is a deadly threat ahead of them. God knows about this because He and His Son experienced it on the cross. Meanwhile we are God's ambassadors, inviting people to choose the Lamb who reconciled us to God.