

The Attributes of God #8

The Wrath of God

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When was the last time you heard a sermon on the wrath of God? How long has it been since you even heard God's wrath mentioned in a sermon or Bible study? Over fifty years ago Arthur Pink remarked: "It is sad indeed to find so many professing Christians who appear to regard the wrath of God as something for which they need to make an apology, or who at least wish there were no such thing. While some would not go so far as to openly admit that they consider it a blemish on the divine character, yet they are far from regarding it with delight; they like not to think about it, and they rarely hear it mentioned without a secret resentment rising up in their hearts against it. Even with those who are more sober in their judgment, not a few seem to imagine that there is a severity about the Divine wrath that makes it too terrifying to form a theme for profitable contemplation. Others harbor the delusion that God's wrath is not consistent with His goodness, and so seek to banish it from their thoughts." As I read Mr. Pink's sentiments, I was struck by the realization that he had just described me. Oh, to be sure, I firmly believe in the wrath of God, but it is not something I like to think about, and I am a little squeamish about proclaiming this attribute to others. Regarding God's wrath, while I am orthodox on paper, I tend to be heterodox in real life. Why so?

Perhaps I speak for many ministers (and other Christians, for that matter) when I admit to avoiding sermons on God's wrath because I fear that it will

alienate the listeners, especially our visitors. After all, what will those who are here for the first time think if I address such a dismal prospect as the wrath of God? I'd like to make a good impression on you so that you come back. I want Faith Presbyterian Church to be a magnet that draws people. My fear is that even touching on God's wrath (much less preaching a full sermon on it) will repel rather than attract you. But what is it about this one subject that makes me so queasy at the thought of preaching it?

J. I. Packer addresses our reluctance to address God's wrath publicly in his classic book, *Knowing God*. In chapter 15 (entitled simply "The Wrath of God"), Packer suggests that we recoil from the very thought of divine wrath because we deem it unworthy of God, since it seems to paint the picture of the Deity as one who, like us, loses self-control and becomes irrationally angry. As a raging bull charges his target oblivious to all else, so God is thought to act when His wrath burns. Admittedly, if this describes God's wrath, it is hard to square it with His other attributes of goodness, love, mercy and grace. Our problem is that knowing our own sinful tendencies, we too readily equate God's wrath with our own. Of course, we are inconsistent, for we never anticipate that God's love could be turned to lust as ours so often is. So why should we think His wrath is like ours?

Packer also suggests that we struggle

with God's wrath because it sounds awfully cruel. We don't like to think of God in this way, but certain Biblical texts seem to indicate that His wrath may be reduced to cruelty. Indeed, some who preach on God's wrath make Him out to be a monster. Even Jonathan Edwards' masterful sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," has been taken that way. But God is not at all cruel. The biblical imagery aids our understanding of the horror of divine judgment. Edwards was trying to drive home the same point. God's judgment is horrific, to be sure, but He is not cruel; rather, God is kind and just.

God's wrath is directly related to His justice. Actually, wrath is the administration of justice. For this reason, God's wrath may not be relegated to mere cruelty. If God's wrath were levied against those who deserved better, then it would be cruel of God to judge men. But the fact is that God's wrath is poured out on those who deserve it. Psalm 62:12 and Romans 2:5-6 teach that God, "*recompenses a man according to His work.*"

"But," someone may argue, "the wrath of God sounds horrible when I read the Bible. Is man's sin deserving of such painful and extreme judgment?" Only someone who has a low view of sin would raise that objection. Beloved, we don't have a clue how weighty sin is and how much it offends God's holiness and righteousness. We take sin lightly, but God does not. "*The wages of sin is death,*" Paul tells us (Romans 6:23). We conclude that God's wrath is not cruel, but just and equitable. Not one person in hell will suffer for things

of which he is not guilty. Not one will be able to say in that day, "I am falsely accused and wrongly punished." Part of what will make hell hell is that everyone there will know he is getting his just desserts.

We must also bear in mind that God is not cruel in judging sinners, because people actually choose God's wrath for themselves. John 1:11 says, "*He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.*" John 3:17-19 states: "*For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.*" Beloved, this is a sobering thought. You choose either eternal life or eternal death; blessing or cursing; heaven's glory or hell's degradation. Choose Christ now and enjoy the blessings of salvation here and for all eternity.

Surely no biblical Christian, much less a teacher or pastor, can fail to warn people of God's wrath. After all, what sort of person would watch a burning house and fail to tell people to escape before they are devoured by flames? Most would likely go so far as to enter the house to rescue the perishing. If we do not tell people they are headed for destruction, how will they know to flee to Christ for salvation? Many years ago when I was fresh out of seminary, I was teaching a home Bible study in which we were studying the attributes of God. The night we studied God's wrath a visitor appeared. His wife had

come to Christ some months before and he was curious what about what attracted her to church and the Bible. Our church had been praying for this man and I did not want to do anything that would scare him off. But there was the horrible subject of God's wrath before us. So, with a silent prayer to the Lord, I took a deep breath and we plowed through our study. The young man was greatly disturbed. It was evident by the expression on his face that he not only did not agree with the wrath of God, but was appalled by the very thought of it. "Well," I thought, "that's it. He'll never come back." Much to my surprise, after the study one of the members of our group led him to Jesus! Truly, he was saved from the fires of hell that night! Dear friends, if there is such a thing as God's wrath, we not only *should* sound the warning, we *must* sound it. Let us turn our attention, then, to the biblical view of God's wrath.

Up to this point we have assumed that the Bible teaches the wrath of God. Let us now look at Scriptures that prove it. The usual Hebrew term for wrath is *baar*, while in the Greek it is *orge*. Both terms refer to a burning anger and when used of God are based on His hatred of sin and evil. God's wrath, unlike man's, is neither capricious nor sinful. God's wrath always comes from righteous indignation. It is displayed throughout the Old and New Testaments, even when the term, itself, is not employed. Not only will God exercise His wrath in the future, in the end times and for all eternity, He inflicts people with His wrath in this life, as well.

It was God's wrath that justly judged Adam and drove him from the Garden of Eden. In His wrath, the Lord destroyed the Egyptians. God's discipline of the Israelites is another example of Divine wrath. When Korah rebelled against the Lord, God's wrath burned and He sent a plague that killed almost 15,000 people. (Numbers 16:45-50). When Israel fell into idolatry with the Moabites, God's wrath required the leaders of the people to be executed (Numbers 25). In Deuteronomy 9 Moses warned the people: "*Remember, do not forget how you provoked the LORD your God to wrath in the wilderness; from the day that you left the land of Egypt until you arrived at this place, you have been rebellious against the LORD. Even at Horeb you provoked the LORD to wrath, and the LORD was so angry with you that He would have destroyed you.*" When Saul did not inflict God's "*fierce wrath*" on the Amalekites, he lost his right to rule God's people, and the Lord replaced him with David (1 Samuel 28). David also knew something of God's wrath, for in Psalm 6 he wrote, "*O Lord, do not rebuke me in Thine anger, nor chasten me in Thy wrath.*" Over 150 examples of God's wrath appear in the Old Testament. Each occurrence of God's wrath was (and is) a response to man's sin and disobedience. The Old Testament many times records the wrath of God burning against recalcitrant sinners in this life.

The New Testament also speaks of a present sense of God's wrath. In Romans 1:18-32 Paul depicts God's present judgment, showing not only its cause, but its character as well. In verses 18-23 the apostle explains why

God's wrath falls on men in this world: *"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures."* Notice that God's wrath is a direct result of man's sin. God reveals Himself to man, but man rejects God's revelation and manufactures a god to his own liking. People did this in the ancient world and we do the same today. Every person who denies God's self-revelation has refused to honor God. We may even seem quite erudite in maintaining that God couldn't possibly be wrathful, but we are futile in our speculations. We become fools.

What does God do to those who refuse Him and His self-revelation? Romans 1:24–32 spells out God's wrath that falls on such as these: *"Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the*

creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them."

Paul explains that God unleashes His wrath upon those who reject Him by allowing sinners to go their own way and fall deeper and deeper in their sin. He mentions many examples of this. Modern man claims that homosexuality is genetic. Some people, they say, are born homosexuals. Well, the Bible says that all men are born sinners. A good friend who is a medical doctor once remarked that we are all latent homosexuals—and we are. We are shot through with sin. But we are also latent thieves, murderers, liars, idolaters,

gossips, adulterers, etc. The gist of Romans here is that all who are enslaved to sin are suffering the wrath of God for their refusal to submit to the Lord. Therefore, we must do as those in Thessalonica who *"turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God"* (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

We now investigate God's future wrath. The Bible teaches that God's wrath will come and abide. John the Baptist hints at this when he asks the Pharisees and Sadducees who told them to *"flee the wrath to come"* (Matthew 3:7). Indeed, God's future wrath is a major theme throughout the New Testament. In Romans 2:5–6 Paul writes, *"But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God will give to each person according to what he has done."* In Colossians 3:5 he exhorts his readers, *"Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming."* John says that God's wrath will come at Christ's second coming, and that Jesus, Himself, will execute it. In Revelation 6:15–17 he writes: *"Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their*

wrath has come, and who can stand?'" And in Revelation 19:15 he says that when Jesus returns, *"He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty."* At the end of the world, God's wrath will come with such a fury as has never been seen in all of history. He will defeat and eternally punish all His enemies.

After Christ defeats all His enemies, He will cast them into the Lake of Fire, and they will suffer in hell. Forever. *"And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. And I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire"* (Revelation 20:10–15). This is the biblical description. Let us notice several things about God's wrath at the last judgment.

First, it will apply to every person

whose name is not written in the book of life. In other words, all who do not have spiritual life in Jesus Christ will be condemned to suffer the wrath of God. There will be no exceptions. Second, they will be tormented. The Greek word rendered “tormented” is *basanidzo* which is used to describe torture, pain, and discomfort. It is used of a headwind that constantly blows against a ship and tosses it about. It is also employed to describe the pains of childbirth. In Luke 16 Jesus tells the story of Lazarus and others who have died and gone to hell where they suffer intensely and cry out for relief.

Note also that the torment in hell will be “*day and night, forever and ever.*” It is fashionable these days to deny eternal judgment and opt instead for annihilation. But the Bible does not teach that God will annihilate the lost; rather He will cause them to suffer for all eternity. And there will be no relief. Jonathan Edwards, perhaps more than anyone else, paints the picture of what it will be like to suffer in hell constantly and forever. He points out that if we were to stick our hand in a fire for 15 seconds, the pain would be unbearable. But since we would know that after 15 seconds we could remove our hand, there would be hope, and the hope would enable us to endure. However, as he shows in hell we do not suffer for 15 seconds. We suffer for eternity—and those there know it! There is no hope; only gloom and pain for eternity. And there is no escape. Once in hell no one can leave. Nor can a person commit suicide and cease to exist. Such a prospect is sobering, is it not? This is why Arthur Pink said that

we need to meditate frequently on God’s wrath. Our wishing it away will not eradicate the wrath of God. Ultimately we will all deal with it. One way or another.

We have only two options regarding God’s wrath. We either throw ourselves upon the mercy of God in Christ before it is too late or suffer the judgment of God for all eternity. If we refuse to flee to Christ in this life, we will end up like the man Christian encountered in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The man was locked in an “Iron Cage of Despair” because he had hardened his heart against God. Aghast, Christian struck up the following conversation with him:

CHRISTIAN: Is there no Hope, but that you must be kept in the Iron Cage of Despair?

MAN: No, none at all.

CHRISTIAN: Why? The Son of the Blessed is very pitiful.

MAN: I have crucified him to myself afresh; I have despised his Person, I have despised his Righteousness, I have counted his Blood an unholy thing, I have done despite to the Spirit of Grace: Therefore I have shut myself out of all the Promises, and there now remains to me nothing but Threatnings, dreadful Threatnings of certain judgment and fiery Indignation, which shall devour me as an Adversary.

CHRISTIAN: For what did you bring yourself into this condition?

MAN: For the Lusts, Pleasures, and Profits of this World; in the enjoyment of which, I did then promise myself much delight: But now every one of those things also bite me, and

gnaw me, like a burning worm.

CHRISTIAN: But canst thou not now repent and turn?

MAN: God hath denied me Repentance. His Word gives me no encouragement to believe; yea, himself hath shut me up in this Iron Cage: Nor can all the men in the world let me out. O Eternity! Eternity! How shall I grapple with the Misery that I must meet with in Eternity!

Do not harden your heart against God and His mercy. Flee from the wrath to come! Listen to the warning from God’s own Word: “*If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.*” (Hebrews 10:26–27).

Paul says, “*the wages of sin is death.*” And it only takes one sin to earn us eternal perdition. Therefore, God has provided a way whereby we may escape the wrath to come. John 3:36 promises: “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.*” Beloved, it is imperative that we believe in Jesus Christ in this life. What does it mean to believe? To believe in Christ is simply to trust Him. It is to place all our hope of escaping God’s wrath in Jesus and in Jesus alone. This means that we rest in His saving grace as we would an easy chair. We believe that He is the Savior; we agree that He has the power to save; we commit our eternal future to Him as our one and only Savior. That is what it means to believe in Jesus.

Why should we trust Christ alone for our salvation from God’s wrath? We place all our hope in Him for the simple reason that He alone bore that wrath for us when He hung on the cross. There He was judged in our place. “*Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation*” (Romans 5:9–11). Beloved, Jesus Christ is God’s appointed way to avoid His eternal wrath. Flee to Him today.

God promises that it is “*Jesus who rescues us from the coming wrath*” (1 Thessalonians 1:10). We are further encouraged that “*God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him*” (1 Thessalonians 5:10). As the apostle writes, “*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*” (Romans 8:1).

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