

The Reality of Wrath: Towards a True Understanding of God and the Gospel

Dr. Daniel Strange

The wrath of God is like great waters that are damned for the present; they increase more and more and rise higher and higher, till an outlet is given; and the longer the stream is stopped, the more rapid and mighty is its course, when once it is let loose ... The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood.

As Christians, what is our immediate reaction to the above quotation from Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon? Does this quotation conjure up certain parodic images of "fire and brimstone" preaching, large black Bibles thumping wooden pulpits? Do we see Edwards' sermon here as an anachronistic relic which has little relevance in our post-modern context? What is it that we wince at: the style of preaching, the intensity of the language or an outdated theology? One reason for our embarrassment is that modern evangelicalism's "default setting" is not a context into which Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God comfortably fits. A more suitable title that catches the current mood might be Coddled Christians in the Hands of a Soothing Celestial Therapist. That God could ever be angry and wrathful towards us is not part of a world that stresses benign love and human potential, and where God is often referred to as a "mate." If anything, the presence of the doctrine of God's wrath in our world is wraithlike, a shadowy fleeting ghost which hovers in the background of our thinking – we know historically it has been important, but if we forget about it, it might disappear back to its own world.

In what follows I want briefly to suggest four reasons why I think the doctrine of the wrath of God is vital to our theology, preaching and teaching, not because I am a Christian who fondly looks back to, and tries to live in, a golden age of a bygone century (I am a generation-Xer of my time), but because only when we understand the wrath of God will we begin to have a true biblical understanding of God, of humanity, of the gospel and of evangelism. These are timeless truths that transcend all cultures and not just truths culturally bound to a particular time and place.

(1) The Importance of Wrath for our Understanding of God

God's wrath has two elements; one negative and one positive. It is both God's personal divine revulsion to evil and also His personal vigorous opposition to it.¹ It is simultaneously recoil and attack. As Don Carson points out, wrath is not an intrinsic perfection of God (for if there was no sin, there would be no wrath), but a function of something else: God's holiness.² The Bible tells us time and again that God cannot look upon sin (e.g., Ps. 5:4-6; Hab. 1:13), to do so is not just "unpleasant" or "unpalatable" for Him, but it is a contradiction of His nature. If God tolerated sin He would cease to be God for He would be seen to be morally indifferent, satisfied both with good and evil. John Stott notes five biblical metaphors which illustrate the fact that sin cannot approach God and that God cannot tolerate sin: height (e.g., Gen. 14:18-22); distance (e.g., Num. 1:51-53; II Sam. 6:1-8); light and fire (e.g., I John 1:5; I Tim. 6:16); and vomiting (e.g., Lev. 18:25-28).³

What are the characteristics of this divine wrath? Firstly it is the opposite of our sinful human displays of anger. It is not fitful or wayward, arbitrary or spasmodic, but principled and controlled and is only aroused by one thing – sin. Secondly it is personal. Contrary to C. H. Dodd and

¹See Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Paternoster, 1965), pp. 190f.

²D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (IVP, 2000), p. 78.

³John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (IVP, 1989), pp. 106-108.

much modern theological thought, wrath is not a shorthand way for talking about the natural consequences of sin. There is an *affective* as well an *effective* element to it.⁴ Thirdly it is passionate. The Bible talks about God's wrath in emotive language and while we must be careful not to eliminate all thoughts of God's impassibility, it is a wrong construal of impassibility that leads to us to drive a wedge between God and wrath which ultimately dilutes God's holiness. Finally, God's wrath is permanent and not spasmodic and in a sense is entirely predicable. God only acts according to his nature and wherever there is sin there is wrath. Over 580 times the Bible talks about this wrath and its characteristics and it is only by an extraordinary hermeneutic that one is able to de-personalize and de-emotionalise it. Isaiah 63 is a typical passage that highlights many of the characteristics we have mentioned:

Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah? This that is glorious in his apparel, travelling in the greatness of his strength? I that speak righteousness, mighty to save. Wherefore art thou red in thine apparel, and thy garments like him that treadeth in the winefat? I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me: for I will tread them in my anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment ... And I will tread down the people in mine anger, and will make them drunk in my fury, and I will bring down their strength to the earth.

I see two applications that flow from this first point. Firstly we need to remember who God is (creator, holy and majestic) and who we are (created, impure and servants) and the difference between the two. Do we always reflect this difference in the way we "worship?" As Stott points out:

There is much shallowness and levity among us. Prophets and psalmists would probably say of us that "there is no fear of

⁴For an analysis and critique of Dodd's thought, see Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, pp. 104-106.

God before their eyes.” In public worship our habit is to slouch or squat, we do not kneel nowadays, let alone prostrate ourselves in humility before God. It is more characteristic of us to clap our hands than to blush with shame or tears. We saunter up to God to claim his patronage and friendship; it does not occur to us that he might send us away.⁵

Secondly, we need to make sure that we do not tolerate sin in our own lives and in the world around us. In I Pet. 1:15, the Apostle exhorts us, “But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.” It is so easy to become blasé and indifferent to sin. Should not we reflect something of the characteristics of God’s holiness, which passionately rejects all evil?

(2) The Importance of Wrath for our Understanding of Humanity

Superficial diagnoses lead to superficial remedies. Those who care most about finding cures for the most terrible diseases, spend the majority of their time looking in detail at the disease itself. Note that such people’s methodology in gaining insight is not to conduct a survey of what people subjectively feel about their disease, but by objectively looking at the condition itself. Because we occupy a place in the Bible’s history of the world, it is possible for us to see a snapshot of where we are now and the state we are in, where we have come from and where we are going. In terms of God’s wrath this makes disturbing reading. The Bible diagnoses our human condition and spares us the kind words. We are in a state of disgrace, by our nature we are objects of wrath (Eph. 2:3); because of our stubbornness and rebellion we are storing up God’s wrath (Rom. 2:5); if we reject the Son, God’s wrath remains on us (Jn. 3:36). In the present we see God’s wrath being revealed in many ways. Universal death must be seen “not as the supreme instance of a cosmic lack of unfairness”⁶ but God’s sentence against sin (Ps. 90:3-11). We see a creation subjected to

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁶D. A. Carson, *How Long O Lord: Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (IVP, 1990), p. 110

universal futility and misery (Rom. 8:21). Most terrifying is the sinking degradation of human behaviour that is God “giving up” humanity – letting men and women go their own way, God intervening by not intervening (Rom. 1: 18-32). However, despite our terminal state, God in his mercy chooses not to unleash his wrath fully now (Rom. 9:22).

In light of God’s forbearance we must never enter the trap of thinking that the God of the OT is wrathful but that the God of the NT is loving. In both Testaments we see both love and wrath. In the OT the love of God does not eliminate His wrath, but it prevents Him from giving full expression to it in His dealing with Israel (Hos. 11:1). In the NT, there are constant calls for men to repent and so escape the wrath to come (Luke 3:7). There is a day of wrath coming when the world will see a terrible unrestrained display of God’s wrath. Everything sinful done now is being stored up for this final day. This is a depressing picture, but we must remember that God is entirely just in his dealings with us and although we may presently see a complete disproportionality between evil committed and suffering experienced, we know from the Bible that “the entire totting up is not yet complete... ultimately justice will be done and will be seen to be done.”⁷

(3) The Importance of Wrath for our Understanding of the Cross

In Romans 3, Paul shows how the death of Christ deals with the problem of sin. Part of his argument is showing how the cross deals with divine wrath. Paul has already had recourse to mention divine wrath earlier on in his argument (1:18; 2:5; 2:8; 3:5) and in 3:25 he notes that God publicly displayed Christ Jesus as a sacrifice which would turn aside his wrath, taking away the sin of his people, in order to demonstrate his justice. This is the “cup” that Jesus talks about in Mark 14:36, it is the cup of God’s wrath which he drinks to the dregs for his people. The point I wish to make here is that we may rightly talk about the cross in terms of redemption, reconciliation, and sacrifice but unless we talk about propi-

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 141

tiation, the appeasing, placating or pacifying of divine wrath, then we have no hope because we are still under God's wrath and without hope. Although the doctrine of propitiation has always been under attack from non-evangelicals⁸ (and increasingly from some evangelicals) we must defend it at all costs because, I want to argue, that far from being just another perspective of the work of Christ, it is the defining perspective:

All of this means that a major revision is essential in the thinking of Christian minds accustomed to viewing the cross work of Christ as being directed primarily, if not solely, toward men. In light of the fact that Paul and John expressly represent as a *propitiating* work, it is important to recognise that Christ's work had a *Godward* reference. Indeed, if one reflects even for a moment on the sinful condition of the race vis-à-vis the holy character of God, it will become clear that *its Godward reference was the cross's primary reference.*⁹

In emphasizing propitiation we must be careful not to misunderstand or distort the doctrine. Here Stott is excellent in guiding us safely through by asking three questions: Why is propitiation necessary? Who makes the propitiation? What is the propitiatory sacrifice? His conclusion highlights the absolute beauty and perfection of the gospel:

God himself is at the heart of our answer to all three questions about the divine propitiation. It is God himself who in holy wrath needs to be propitiated, God himself who in holy love undertook to do the propitiating, and God himself in the person of his Son who died for the propitiation of our sins. Thus God took his own loving initiative to appease his own righteous anger by bearing it his own self in his Son when he took our place and died for us.

⁸Most famously by C. H. Dodd who interpreted "propitiation" as "expiation." For a thorough discussion and critique of Dodd's view see Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Tyndale Press, 1955).

⁹Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 639.

So what is the believers' state with regard to wrath? Nothing other than a total transformation. Believers have moved from a state of disgrace into a state of grace. They have been delivered from the coming wrath (I Thess. 1:10, Rom. 5:9); they are not appointed unto wrath but unto salvation (I Thess. 5:9). Concerning the future pouring of God's wrath believers are safe: "For whatever disasters may fall upon the earth, as the death bringing contents of wrath are poured out, they cannot touch God's servants whose foreheads are sealed with the blessed name of their Redeemer, and whose names stand written in the book of life."¹⁰ Isn't this an amazing truth and a constant source and praise and wonder? Yet ironically it is only in understanding the depth of our sin and the seriousness of God's wrath against it that we *truly* understand the depth of God's love and His glorious provision of a remedy. This is good news, this is the gospel, let us do nothing to dilute it or empty the cross of its power.

(4) The Importance of Wrath for our Understanding of Evangelism

There is an almost surreal part in the film *Titanic* where the inevitable plight of the indestructible ship has just been revealed to the captain and to us the viewer – it is going down. At this point the camera takes us to the ballroom where there is an amazing party of eating, drinking and merriment. Everyone is oblivious to their plight. This is the situation we see today, unbelievers going about their daily lives thinking everything is okay, thinking they are indestructible: "God isn't judging me" or "I haven't been hit with a thunderbolt yet." The world seen through the prism of the Word shows a very different analysis for in reality these people are sinking, strangely by "filling up" with God's wrath. This is why we must urgently tell people of their plight. Lloyd-Jones summarizes the situation far better than me:

Why is it that people do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ?
 Why is it that people are not Christians and not members of the

¹⁰R. V. G. Tasker, "The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God – Part 2," *Themelios* 26/3 (Summer, 2001), pp. 20f.

Christian church? Why is it that the Lord does not come into their calculations at all? In the last analysis there is only one answer to that question: they do not believe in Him because they have never seen any need of Him. And they have never seen any need of Him because they have never realised that they are sinners. And they have never realised they are sinners because they have never realised the truth about the holiness of God and the justice and righteousness of God; they have never known anything about God as the judge eternal and about the wrath of God against the sin of man. So you see this doctrine is essential in evangelism. If we really believe in salvation and in our absolute need of the Lord Jesus Christ, we must start with this doctrine.¹¹

In our evangelism we sometimes need to do some straight talking and get to the heart of the matter. It is not just a matter of trying to get people to talk about what they feel. This is the problem with an appeal to “felt needs.” Yes, unbelievers lack meaning and purpose in their life, yes they are alienated from themselves and society, and yes they are searching for something. However, to stop here is to only talk about the symptoms rather than getting to the actual problem that condemns us to hell – God’s anger towards us. This is the “disease” that needs a cure and in his grace God Himself has provided one.

God’s righteous wrath and judgement on the world and His provision of a propitiatory sacrifice in Christ Jesus is the heart of the gospel and is wonderful truth. However for many, including unbelieving lecturers and professors, the cross is the offence it has always been, and as a result the doctrine is suppressed, distorted and denied even by the most brilliant academic minds. Yet, however unfashionable or unpopular such a doctrine is in modern theological thought, for all the reasons I have outlined above, we need to affirm the doctrine of the wrath of God, to not be embarrassed about our holy God, but to put the doctrine at the forefront

¹¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Way of Reconciliation* (Banner of Truth, 1972), p.71.

of our theological thinking. We must make sure that our doctrine of God derives from biblical revelation and not other authorities that tend to make God in the image of man. As evangelical theological students we need to have a secure understanding of the doctrine of God and the cross of Christ. We must be always ready to correct misunderstandings of wrath and propitiation, and to present clearly biblical truth on these matters. Although this may lead some to scorn and ridicule us, we need not be afraid, as we know that we have supernatural help in guarding the good deposit entrusted to us – “by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us” (II Tim. 1:14). Therefore like Paul let us be confident in our proclamation, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ; for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth...” (Rom. 1:16).

This article was authored by Daniel Strange, who co-ordinates the work of the Religious and Theological Studies Fellowship, part of UCCF. His PhD entitled “The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelised” will be published by Paternoster next month. This article is printed with permission from Athens to Jerusalem where it originally appeared.

Alan Cairns on the wrath of God: “‘The wrath of God’ is a scriptural phrase that describes the settled opposition of God’s nature against evil, His holy displeasure against sinners and the punishment He justly metes out to them on account of their sins. Paul calls this punishment ‘the wrath to come’ (I Thess. 1:10) and describes the time of its execution as ‘the day of wrath’ (Rom. 2:4). This punishment is denominated ‘endless punishment’ by the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 25:31-33, 41, 46), in a place of ‘hell fire where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched’ (Mark 9:47, 48). There the wicked endured endless conscious suffering (cf. Luke 16:19-31)” (*Dictionary of Theological Terms* [Ambassador-Emerald International, rev. 1998], pp. 446-447).