

God's Wrath

Part 1

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The apostle John says, "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). So, if God is love, what is this thing called God's wrath? How can a loving God also be a wrathful God? Did God change from being a wrathful God in the Old Testament to being a loving God in the New? Are we misunderstanding something?

God's Wrath in the Old Testament before Moses

First, I want to dispel the myth that the God of the Old Testament is only wrathful. The Scriptures of the Old Testament use Hebrew terms that can be translated as "loving," "loving kindness," "merciful," and so forth to describe God, close to two hundred times. We should dismiss as an urban legend the idea that God in the Old Testament is only wrathful.

This article is about God's wrath, so let's look at a few early Old Testament examples that show God as expressing wrath.

The account of Noah and the Flood doesn't expressly use the word "wrath." It says,

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of man's heart was continually only evil. The LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him in his heart. The LORD said, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the surface of the ground—man, along with animals, creeping things, and birds of the sky—for I am sorry that I have made them."

Genesis 6:5-7

Consider what God did after He said this. He sent a flood that, with the exception of a mere eight people, killed every man, woman, and child on the Earth, as well as most of the animals. That certainly sounds like wrath to me. How could a loving God do this?

Centuries later, Peter tells us that the eight people in the ark were saved through the water (1 Peter 3:20). In his second epistle, Peter again says that God, "didn't spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah with seven others,

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a preacher of righteousness, when he brought a flood on the world of the ungodly” (2 Peter 2:5).

I want to write a separate article on the types and shadows in the account of Noah and the Flood. But briefly, I will point out that the ark pictured Jesus Christ saving His people from God’s wrath. The Flood, then, pictured God’s wrath. So, while the ark/Christ saved them from God’s wrath, God’s wrath/the Flood, saved them, as we just read from Peter, from the wicked world. That’s right, God’s wrath saves the godly from the ungodly. We’ll see when we discuss the New Testament that this is pictured there also.

In Genesis 19, we read of God’s wrath against Sodom and Gomorrah, with only Lot, his two unmarried daughters, and his wife escaping the total destruction. Even so, God also killed Lot’s wife when she looked back. Again, how could a loving God do this? He did it to save His people from the wicked people. God’s love is for His elect, and His wrath is for the rest. (If you’re wondering about God sending rain on the just and the unjust, I’ll explain that later.)

God’s Wrath in the Old Testament during and after Moses’ Lifetime

In the following passage from the Law, God promises to take vengeful wrath upon those who take advantage of widows and orphans:

You shall not take advantage of any widow or fatherless child. If you take advantage of them at all, and they cry at all to me, I will surely hear their cry; and my wrath will grow hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless.

Exodus 22:22-24

Like the earlier examples, this shows that God expresses His wrath against some for the sake of others.

During the Exodus, after the children of Israel had made the golden calf,

The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen these people, and behold, they are a stiff-necked people. Now therefore leave me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them, and that I may consume them; and I will make of you a great nation.”

Exodus 32:9-10

In response, "Moses begged the LORD his God, and said, '...LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, that you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?'" (verse 11). Of course, God knew this truth even better than Moses. He was merely behaving with human characteristics in order to create the reaction He wanted in Moses. God wanted Moses to intervene in a Christ-like way for the people, even while they were sinners. It was a typological moment.

In Numbers 11, we read that the people were not satisfied with the manna God provided. They wanted meat. God sent them quail. And then, "While the flesh was yet between their teeth, before it was chewed, the LORD's anger burnt against the people, and the LORD struck the people with a very great plague" (Numbers 11:33).

I could cite many more passages, but there's no need. We're all likely aware of the passages where God commands the Israelites to attack cities and nations and not spare them, killing even their women and children. These were pictures of God exercising His wrath against the reprobate for the sake of His elect.

The Old Testament obviously speaks of God as having wrath and anger. Because we're speaking about God, strictly speaking, it's wrong to think of God as having human emotions. These are really anthropomorphisms. God is describing His actions in terms of emotions we can relate to. Nevertheless, although God's wrath is not really the eruptive rage we humans might picture, it is real, it is powerful, and the result is not pretty. And that's what counts. Whoever is on the receiving end of God's wrath is not in an enviable position.

True, in Exodus 34:6-7, God describes Himself as merciful, gracious, abundant in loving kindness, and slow to anger. But slow to anger doesn't mean never angry. Yet, when we consider how wicked humanity has been through the ages, we can appreciate how slow God really is to anger. In Acts 17:30, Paul refers to God overlooking sin. Yet, God sees no contradiction in describing Himself as both loving and having anger. But do things change in the New Testament?

God's Wrath in the New Testament

Just as we dispelled the myth that the God of the Old Testament was not loving, we need to dispel the myth that the God of the New Testament is not wrathful. There is only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4), and He is the God of both the Old and New Testaments.

Far from presenting a God of no wrath, as some people claim, the New Testament wastes little time in introducing us to God's wrath. Describing people coming to be baptized by John the Baptist, Matthew 3:7-8 says,

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, "You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore produce fruit worthy of repentance!... His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will thoroughly cleanse his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn up with unquenchable fire."

Matthew 3:7-8, 12

John taught that there is a wrath to flee from through repentance. The same One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit (see verse 11) will gather those who repent as one gathers wheat into a barn. And He will burn the rest as one burns chaff, but with fire that is unquenchable. The salvation of believers includes God's separating the wicked from the saints.

John the Baptist is also recorded as saying, "One who believes in the Son has eternal life, but one who disobeys the Son won't see life, but the wrath of God remains on him" (John 3:36). In the New Testament—even more clearly than in the Old—we see that everyone falls into one or the other of two groups. You either belong to those who repent and believe on Jesus Christ and are saved, or you are among those who don't believe or "disobey" and will be punished under God's wrath. That word "disobey" is from the Greek word *apeitheō*. It means to refuse to be persuaded.

Some might object that John the Baptist was not a New Testament prophet, but was the last of the Old Testament prophets. That's true. But God's wrath in the New Testament isn't limited to the words of John the Baptist. In Romans the Apostle Paul gives us more detail about the concept of everyone falling into one of two groups.

For I am not ashamed of the Good News of Christ, for it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes; for the Jew first, and also for the Greek. For in it is revealed God's righteousness from faith to faith. As it is written, "But the righteous shall live by faith." For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known of God is revealed in them, for God revealed it to them. For the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are

clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity; that they may be without excuse.

Romans 1:16-20

Again, we see the righteous who live by faith, and the unrighteous who refuse to believe. The Gospel reveals God's righteousness. The Creation, including what is within us—"that which is known of God is revealed in them"—reveals what is known of God. The "what is known of God" here is not the fuller revelation we have in God's Word. Yet, the unrighteous willfully disbelieve even this evidence and suppress the truth, so God reveals His wrath against them.

In Romans 2, Paul rails against hypocrites who accuse others of sins, but don't realize that they are also sinners. God's judgment is against such (verses 1-2). Those who don't repent of their hard hearts are treasuring up wrath in the day of wrath. God will repay all according to their works (verse 5). The "all" here refers to those who are rejecting God's grace and still relying upon works, shown in their accusing attitude toward others. Paul expects that true believers will understand the basic Gospel message that they are not judged according to their works, but they are saved by grace. He explains this in Romans 3:21-26 and many other places. Although we were as guilty of sin as anyone else, God "saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given to us in Christ Jesus before times eternal" (2 Timothy 1:9).

In Part 2, we'll see the importance of understanding God's wrath and its relationship to the Gospel, learn how God can express both love and wrath, and answer some objections.

Further reading: "Why is the God of the Old Testament wrathful but the God of the New Testament loving?"
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