

# 119

## MINISTRIES

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### **Making Sense of God’s Wrath**

The Bible teaches that God is love, that he is merciful and kind, and that he forgives sin. But there’s another thing the Bible teaches us about God that many people in our modern world—including many Christians—don’t like to talk about so much. That is, God is holy. And because he is holy, he responds in wrath to all that is evil and unrighteous.

God’s wrath can make us feel uncomfortable, and we might be inclined to avoid the subject. But the Bible says that God wants us to acknowledge his wrath; in fact, he wants us to teach our children about it:

#### **Exodus 10:1-2**

Then the LORD [YHWH] said to Moses, “Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, **and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians** and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the LORD [YHWH].

According to this passage, God wants future generations of Israelites to know that he has dealt harshly with the Egyptians. He wasn’t very nice to them. He sent plagues upon the land as a testimony of his judgment upon Egypt, and this story is something he wants to be passed down from generation to generation. Why? So that we may “know” him. God’s wrath is an aspect of who he is.

This concept is repeated a couple of chapters later in Exodus when YHWH institutes Passover, a meal we keep every year as a memorial of the Exodus story. Moses says that when our children ask us what this Passover thing is all about, we’re supposed to tell them that it reminds us of not just the fact that God saved his people but also that he punished the Egyptians:

#### **Exodus 12:26-27**

And when your children say to you, “What do you mean by this service?” you shall say, “It is the sacrifice of the LORD’s [YHWH’s] Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, **when he struck the Egyptians** but spared our houses.” And the people bowed

their heads and worshiped.

So, knowing God must include learning about his wrath and judgment—the fact that he punishes evil.

To be clear, God's wrath is not him losing his temper and throwing a tantrum like a toddler. God's wrath is the *intentional* response of a holy God against evil, injustice, and rebellion. God is love, but because he is holy, he responds to evil with wrath. As it says in Romans:

#### **Romans 2:5-8**

But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.

Some people have a hard time reconciling God's wrath with his love. How can God be so loving that he wants to save everyone, but also so wrathful that he will destroy sinners? Thus, some have denied the reality of God's wrath entirely.

For instance, the second-century gnostic heretic, Marcion, said that the God of the New Testament, who sent Jesus into the world to save it, and the God of the Old Testament, are entirely different gods. Thus, the wrathful God of the Old Testament is not the same God that Christians worship. Problem solved!

However, this approach has a significant flaw. Besides the obvious fact that it is blatant heresy, we find both God's love and his wrath in both "Testaments." To be sure, God executes wrath in the Old Testament. And yet, he also expresses immense love and mercy, sometimes *literally pleading* with the wicked to repent so they could be saved:

#### **Ezekiel 33:11**

Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD [YHWH], I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?

Additionally, God loved the *pagan nation* of Nineveh so much that he sent a prophet to them so that they might repent and be saved from judgment, as we read about in the book of Jonah. And there are many other examples.

In the New Testament, Yeshua does speak a lot about God's love. And yet, he also says things like this:

#### **Matthew 25:41-46**

"Then he will say to those on his left, '**Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.** For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' **And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.**"

In 2 Thessalonians, Paul teaches that Yeshua himself will return to inflict vengeance on everyone who does not obey the gospel:

## 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10

This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus [Yeshua] is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus [Yeshua]. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

Additionally, the first two and a half chapters of Romans are all about God's wrath. Paul's point is that all people—Jew and Gentile alike—have sinned, and thus, God's wrath rests upon everyone. Paul says there will be consequences—eternal consequences—for the choices you make. Again, as Paul says in Romans 2:6, “He will render to each one according to his works.”

So, both God's love and his wrath are expressed throughout the Bible. The same God who judges the world through a flood in Genesis, also judges the world through a lake of fire in Revelation. God's love has not changed, and neither has his wrath.

But how do we understand God's wrath in light of his love and goodness? One way we might make sense of God's wrath would be to ask, “What would be the alternative to a world without God's wrath?” Would we really prefer a world where evil and injustice exist, but God is *indifferent* to it? Would that be better? Not at all.

Nobody looks at people who are indifferent to evil and injustice and says, “Those are good and loving people!”

No, we typically consider them to be cowards. We know that it is not virtuous to be indifferent toward evil. Instead, it is virtuous to condemn evil and to stand up for what is right. We recognize that it is good to condemn things like murder, rape, abuse, and oppression. And when people have the power to do something about evil and injustice, we all believe that they should! Love and goodness *require* it!

There's a popular movie where a man's daughter is kidnapped by sex traffickers. The man goes on a mission to hunt down the kidnappers and save his daughter. In the process, he ends up destroying an entire sex trafficking network. Everyone who watches the movie cheers when the hero kills the bad guys and rescues the oppressed women who had been kidnapped and trafficked. That's because, deep down, we all know that goodness requires doing something about evil.

While many skeptics will criticize the God of the Bible for executing wrath and judgment, many of those same skeptics will argue that a good God can't exist because there is too much evil in the world. But if they object to God's existence because there is too much evil in the world, then they are assuming that a good God would destroy the people that are causing the evil! So, a good and loving God would not be indifferent to evil and injustice. In fact, for God to be good, he must oppose evil; he has to respond to evil deeds with wrath.

New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, speaks to this in his book, “Simply Good News.” He refers to God’s wrath as the “shadow side” of God’s love:

The wrath of God is simply the shadow side of the love of God for his wonderful creation and his amazing human creatures. Like a great artist appalled at the way his paintings have been defaced by the very people who were supposed to be looking after them, God’s rejection of evil is the natural outflowing of his creative love. God’s anger against evil is itself the determination to put things right, to get rid of the corrupt attitudes and behaviors that have spoiled his world and his human creatures. It is because God loves the glorious world he has made and is utterly determined to put everything right that he is utterly opposed to everything that spoils or destroys that creation, especially the human creatures who were supposed to be the linchpins of his plan for how that creation would flourish.

-N.T. Wright, *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel is News and What Makes it Good* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), p. 70

So, God’s wrath is ultimately motivated by his love for his creation, especially his human creatures. He loves his creation so much that he does something to get rid of sin.

In the same letter of Romans, where Paul talks extensively about God’s wrath, the central theme is God’s love for us. He loves us so much that he rescues us from the punishment we deserve for our sin:

#### **Romans 5:8-9**

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.

There is nothing we can say to make you feel comfortable about the biblical doctrine of God’s wrath. Sure, we can put it in perspective, and show how it is not incompatible with God’s goodness. But it’s still a subject that makes us uncomfortable. And that’s because it is supposed to make us uncomfortable.

Why? Because there is a temptation to trivialize sin. There is a temptation to dismiss sin as not that big of a deal. Recognizing what the Bible says about God’s wrath helps us to see the gravity of our sin in light of a holy God. We all deserve judgment.

But because God loves you, he has provided a way for you to be saved from wrath, despite your sin. Through the Messiah’s death on the cross, God’s wrath is satisfied. Because of Yeshua’s work, we can be saved:

#### **Romans 3:23-26**

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua], whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus [Yeshua].

We all deserve judgment. But we have been given something beautiful that we don’t deserve: the opportunity to be rescued from wrath and to be transformed into new creations that glorify God.

This is why understanding God's wrath toward evil is so important. It helps us recognize the evil *within ourselves* and our desperate need for deliverance. It brings us to that place we need to be to be able to receive God's invitation to be saved by faith in Messiah Yeshua. And as new creations, transformed by God's love, we can proclaim the glorious, rescuing power of God's love to the world.

*We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.*

*Remember, continue to test everything.*

*Shalom!*

*For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at [www.testeverything.net](http://www.testeverything.net)*

**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

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