

The Righteousness of God Revealed

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

The book of Romans is magnificent in that it reveals so many aspects of the “righteousness of God” (1:16-17). In this discussion, four of these will be considered.

The Wrath of God

While the concept of the love of God should never be minimized, it is also true that there is another element to the nature of our Creator: he also is a God of wrath. The expression “wrath of God” is found about a dozen times in the text of the English Bible (ASV). It is a theme of some prominence in the book of Romans.

The most common Greek word for “wrath” is *orge*. The term is found thirty-six times in the New Testament, with a third of these in Romans. Another term denoting “wrath” or “anger” is *thymos*, occurring eighteen times in the New Testament, and rendered “indignation” in Romans 2:8. Most scholars make some distinction between the two words. Trench suggested that *thymos* is “boiling” anger, whereas *orge* reflects an “abiding and settled habit of mind” (1980, 131). Perhaps the two terms in concert denote the intense and sustained disposition of God toward evil, and those who have abandoned themselves to it.

Initially, it should be noted that the use of “wrath” does not indicate an impulsive, spasmodic, emotional reaction, as it frequently does with humans. Rather, it denotes a deliberate and measured reaction toward sinful rebellion—a response that is wholly consistent with the righteous nature of a benevolent and just deity.

A survey of several passages in Paul’s letter to the Romans reveals a number of important truths relative to the wrath of God:

(1) The Lord’s wrath is not inflicted impulsively. Rather, history repeatedly has demonstrated that God exercises “much long-suffering” toward those deserving of punishment (Romans 9:22). His patience was demonstrated to the generation of Noah’s day (Genesis 6:3). He longed to spare corrupt Sodom (Genesis 18:26ff). Jehovah revealed himself to Moses as a God who is “slow to anger” (Exodus 34:6; cf. Psalm 103:8). The Lord was even long-suffering with a wretch as vile as Ahab (1 Kings 21:29). For centuries he was tolerant with the arrogant and stiff-necked nation of Israel (Nehemiah 9:17).

(2) Biblical precedent has shown, however, that once God’s “patience” has been exhausted (the language is accommodative), his anger will be visited upon those deserving thereof. Paul says the Sovereign is “willing to show his wrath, and make his power known” (Romans 9:22). With the exception of eight souls, the entire human family was destroyed by the great flood of antiquity (1 Peter 3:20). Sodom, Gomorrah, and their sister cities were turned into ashes due to their impenitent wickedness (2 Peter 2:6). Israel and Judah were enslaved to Assyria and Babylon respectively because of their sordid insolence. The examples are almost endless.

(3) The final exhibition of divine wrath will entail a complete purging. The Judge “will thoroughly cleanse his threshing floor” (Matthew 3:12), taking vengeance upon “all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who hinder the truth” (Romans 1:18). This is one reason heaven will be so blissful (Revelation 21:8; 22:15).

(4) The wrath of Heaven will be administered justly. The apostle speaks of the “day of wrath” when “the righteous judgment of God” will be visited upon those who have earned that destiny (Romans 2:5; cf. “wages,” 6:23). Abraham expressed confidence in the fact that Jehovah does not punish indiscriminately. To the contrary, the Judge of all the earth will do what is right (Genesis 18:25). When the victorious Christ finally makes “war” upon his enemies, he will do so “in righteousness” (Revelation 19:11). The terminal judgment will be fair in that it will: (a) take into consideration one’s level of personal knowledge (Luke 12:47-48); (b) be consistent with one’s individual abilities (Luke 19:13ff); (c) be rendered in light of one’s unique opportunities (Matthew 11:20ff); and, (d) be cognizant of the law-system to which one was amenable (Hebrews 10:28-29).

Those who become subject to the Creator's eternal wrath will be entirely worthy of that destiny. God does not desire that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9), but he will honor the free will with which he has endowed us. When men choose to turn from the Lord, they determine their own destiny.

In his letter to the Romans Paul speaks of those "vessels of wrath fitted unto destruction" (9:22). The term "fitted" (katartizo) may be taken either as a passive or middle form. The passive represents the subject as being acted upon; the middle suggests that the subject acts in some fashion relative to himself. Arndt and Gingrich render the phrase: "having prepared themselves for destruction" (1967, 419). Another scholar notes:

The form of the word rendered "fitted" may be regarded as a middle voice, which implies action done by oneself with a view to one's own aims and interests. There is a suggestion, therefore, that the persons referred to as "vessels of wrath" have fitted themselves for destruction (Vine 1948, 147-48).

The denominational notion that Adam's fallen descendants are "by nature [i.e., by heredity] children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3 – KJV) is false. The Greek word phusei (nature) has to do with a "native mode of feeling and acting which by long habit has **become** nature" (Thayer 1958, 660; emphasis added). The context clearly shows that the depravity described was the result of "your trespasses and sins"—not those of Adam (see [Are Infants By Nature Children of Wrath?](#)).

(5) Happily, however, the redemptive message of the Bible is this: man can be "saved from the wrath of God" through the plan of reconciliation implemented by the mission of Jesus Christ (Romans 5:9).

(6) The most dramatic scene of the final outpouring of divine wrath is that which John was permitted to view in Revelation 19:11-16. Christ, called the Word (v. 13; cf. John 1:1, 14; 1 John 1:1), is portrayed as a righteous warrior riding victoriously upon a white horse.

He is ready to "judge and make war." He is arrayed in a garment that looks as if it has been dyed in blood (Arndt and Gingrich, 132). The imagery is from Isaiah 63, where Jehovah is depicted as having just come from a slaughter of the Edomites (perpetual enemies of Israel). Christ is ready to tread the "winepress of the fierceness [thymos] of the wrath [orge] of God, the Almighty." His anger is like unmixed (i.e., undiluted) wine—thus, anger at full strength (Revelation 14:10). With the sharp sword of his mouth the nations are slain (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:8). His enemies are broken to pieces with his "rod" (cf. Psalm 2:9; Revelation 2:27). By this awesome judgment he forever establishes his authority as KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS. Has any scene ever more forcefully demonstrated the heinous nature of rebellion against God?

The Grace of God

Standing over against the stark reality of divine wrath, is the thrilling concept of heavenly grace. "Grace" is derived from the Greek, charis. In secular Greek, charis was related to chairo, meaning "to rejoice." As far back as the time of Homer it denoted "sweetness" or "attractiveness." It came to signify "favor," "goodwill," and "lovingkindness"—especially as granted to an inferior by a superior.

In the New Testament, the term takes on a special redemptive sense wherein God bestows his favor upon those who are undeserving thereof.

Charis has been distinctively appropriated in the NT to designate the relation and conduct of God towards sinful man as revealed in and through Christ, especially as an act of spontaneous favor, of favor wherein no mention can be made of obligation (Cremer 1962, 574; cf. Thayer, 666).

The word is found some 156 times in the New Testament, and twenty-four of these are in Romans (more than any other book).

There is great emphasis in the New Testament upon the fact that human salvation is the result of Heaven's grace. This beautiful truth should never be ignored. At the same time, it must not be perverted. Tragically, this has been done far too often by those who profess a friendship with Christianity. Let us consider some of the major Bible truths associated with the concept of salvation by the grace of God:

(1) God's grace has been offered to the entire human family. "For the grace of God hath appeared, bringing salvation to all men" (Titus 2:11). This cannot mean that every soul will be saved. Such a conclusion would contradict numerous other passages.

What it does suggest is that Heaven's grace is potentially available to all who care to access it by means of submission to the divine plan of redemption (cf. Romans 5:1; 6:3-4, 17). This truth is in direct conflict with the Calvinistic notion that God, before the foundation of the world, chose only specifically predetermined persons to be recipients of his grace.

(2) The access to God's grace is by means of objective revelation. Again, as Paul noted: "For the grace of God hath appeared . . . instructing us" (Titus 2:11, 12). Christianity is a taught religion. Only "the truth" can set one free (John 8:32).

Isaiah, speaking of the messianic age, exclaimed, "[H]e will teach us of his ways" (2:3). Jesus himself declared, "It is written in the prophets, And they shall all be taught of God. Every one that hath heard from the Father, and hath learned, cometh unto me" (John 6:45).

God's grace is not dispensed apart from instruction—joined with understanding and obedience. In these days when there is a tendency to almost "stampede" folks into the church, with minimal comprehension of what they are doing, this is a crucial matter to emphasize.

(3) The reception of God's grace is conditional. Calvinism erroneously asserts that grace is bestowed unconditionally by the sovereign will of God. Both Testaments negate this concept. The principle is illustrated by the example of Noah, who "found grace in the eyes of the Lord" (Genesis 6:8); and yet, the writer of Hebrews affirms that the patriarch and his family were saved by the preparing of an ark (11:7; cf. Genesis 6:22). Jehovah proffered the grace; Noah, in faith, obeyed, and so was blessed. While God extends grace, human beings must be willing to receive that favor (2 Corinthians 6:1).

(4) Grace excludes merit. We must constantly remind ourselves that humanity is not deserving of salvation. As Martin Luther expressed it: we are "stinking sinners." Pardon can never be earned by works of human merit. If such were the case, we could boast regarding our redemption; however, that is impossible (Ephesians 2:8-9). Even if one could perform everything commanded, he still is to regard himself as an "unprofitable servant" (Luke 17:10). Jesus taught that our sins have put us head-over-heels in debt, and no person has the ability to liquidate that obligation (cf. Matthew 18:24-27).

When this concept is truly grasped, service to Almighty God will flow with a freshness and zeal that invigorates the soul. Doubtless a failure to fathom the true significance of grace is the reason so many church members are spiritually lethargic.

(5) Grace is accessed at the point of gospel obedience. It is shocking that so many sincere people are unaware of the fact that grace and obedience are not enemies. Paul affirmed that grace is accessed by faith (Romans 5:1-2; Ephesians 2:8-9). It is not, however, a faith void of response to God; it is a faith that acts (James 2:21-26).

Consider this fact: In Ephesians 2:8, the apostle states that one is "saved by grace through faith." Later, in the same document, he says that sinners are "cleansed by the washing of water with the word" (5:26). It is well nigh universally conceded that this "washing" is an allusion to baptism (Arndt and Gingrich, 481; Thayer, 382). It is clear, therefore, that the reception of grace by means of the faith system entails obedience, including immersion in water.

Again, eternal life is the result of grace (cf. "grace of life," 1 Peter 3:7—i.e., the life that results from grace); but one experiences that "newness of life" when he is raised from the water of immersion (Romans 6:4). Obedience is not excluded from God's grace system. To say the same thing in another way, Christ "saves us, through the washing of regeneration [baptism (Thayer, 382)] and the renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). This is equivalent to being "justified by his grace" (Titus 3:7).

(6) The state of grace must be embraced continuously; otherwise one will fall therefrom, and his initial reception of Heaven's "favor" will have been "in vain" (2 Corinthians 6:1; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:10). It is incredible that many who identify themselves with Christianity should contend that it is impossible for the Christian to fall from God's grace. If one

cannot fall out of grace, why did Paul urge his fellow believers to “continue [present tense—sustained perseverance] in the grace of God” (Acts 13:43)? “This faithful continuing in grace stands in contrast to the vacillation that easily lets go (Acts 13:43; Mk. 4:17)” (Hauck 1985, 584).

The truth is, the Scriptures speak of certain children of God (see Galatians 3:26-27) who, attempting to revert to the Mosaic regime for salvation, were “severed from Christ” and “fallen away from grace” (Galatians 5:4; cf. Hebrews 12:5).

The Will of God

A consideration of the will of God is a profound theme indeed—one that cannot be plumbed fully by the mind of man (Romans 11:33-36). The will of God is a concept difficult to define. A simple statement might be: God’s will has to do with the implementation of a plan which issues from his holy and just desires. Before discussing various aspects of the will of God, perhaps a preliminary observation is in order:

Jehovah is a sovereign being. He has the liberty, therefore, to will and to do what he pleases in all matters. Be that as it may, God never wills to do anything that is antagonistic to his moral attributes. That is why, for example, the Lord cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18). Such would contradict his absolutely “holy” nature (Isaiah 6:3; Habakkuk 1:13). And so, God’s will is **limited by his character**—qualities such as holiness, truth, and justice.

The will of God may be considered under several headings. But first, this preliminary question: why did God make angels, the universe, and mankind? “Worthy art thou, our Lord and our God, to receive the glory and the honor and the power: for thou didst create all things, and because of thy will they were, and were created” (Revelation 4:11). But this verse leaves one unenlightened as to details. It simply affirms that the creation is the result of Heaven’s will. Obviously “to be” is better somehow than “not to be.” (For further study, see Geisler and Brooks, chapter four.) Let us now contemplate some of the various elements of the will of God:

(1) Every thing created by Jehovah was “very good” originally (Genesis 1:31). The ideal will of God obviously was that the creation remain in that pristine state. However, due to the fact that humans were granted volition, and that they are finite in nature, the potential for disobedience was imminent. And so, while it is the ideal will of God that men not sin (1 John 2:1), nevertheless such results as a consequence of the gift of freedom.

To remedy human transgression, the Lord implemented a plan of salvation. Again, it is his ideal will that all men partake of the benefits of this system, so that none remains lost (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). Tragically, however, many have rejected the sacred “counsel” (Luke 7:30), hence will perish (Matthew 7:13). Such is not what the Creator desires; but it is the inevitable consequence if justice is to prevail.

(2) This brings us to a consideration of the permissive will of God. Because God has granted us the power to make choices, he has permitted us to reap certain negative consequences of the bad choices we make. These “price tags” affect us in numerous adverse ways (e.g., sickness, suffering, and death; cf. Romans 5:12); indeed our whole environment has suffered.

Paul addresses this very matter in his letter to the Romans. The creation was not subjected to vanity by virtue of “its own will,” but “by reason of him [i.e., the will of him] who subjected it” (8:20). Thus, sin and its fruit exist—not because God wills such ideally, but because these effects are necessary ultimately in the divine scheme of things. This sin-cursed planet is not the best of all environments (cf. Hebrews 11:16); it is, however, apparently the best domain for preparing us for eternity.

(3) Let us reflect upon what may be designated as the decreed will of God. This involves the implementation of the purpose of the Creator in producing a plan for human redemption. For example, the death of Christ was the key feature in the “determinate counsel” (i.e., a counsel which determines) of God (Acts 2:23). Jesus, though offering himself (Galatians 1:4; Philippians 2:5ff), was nonetheless “appointed” by God (Acts 3:20). He was to be “tried” (Isaiah 28:16; Hebrews 4:15), and thus qualified to die as a substitute on our behalf. The will of God, as carefully worked out across the centuries—eventually culminating at Golgotha—is awesome beyond words. Surely, had men understood it, “they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:8).

(4) The intervention of deity into the events of human history for the accomplishment of sacred purposes might be designated as the active will of God. This concept stands in relief to the philosophical ideology known as deism—the notion that Jehovah has no interaction with his creation.

God's active will may be described in two ways: (a) In the past, as the revelation of his plan was unfolding, the Lord intervened directly—in the performance of miracles. Through Christ and his appointed men, the sick were healed, the dead raised, etc. Biblical evidence indicates that Jehovah is not operating in that mode today (see 1 Corinthians 13:8ff; Ephesians 4:8-16; Jackson 1990, 114-124; also see [Miracles](#)).

He is still active, however, in orchestrating his will on earth. This we accommodatively call providence. It is the operation of God through the maneuvering of natural events. For example, Paul expressed his desire to the Roman saints that perhaps, “by the will of God,” he might be permitted to visit them (Romans 1:10). Eventually, he did—but as a prisoner (cf. Acts 23:11; 25:11; 26:32; 27:1ff; see Jackson 1997, 262-272). A pagan king was even forced to acknowledge that God operates “according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What are you doing?” (Daniel 4:35).

(5) The mind of God has been made known in a body of literature known as the Holy Scriptures. This may be denominated as the objective will of God, i.e., as opposed to subjectivism—the dependence upon one's feelings, personal ideas, etc.—regarding religion. Objective revelation ultimately was codified in the volume known as the New Testament.

The will of God, by means of these inspired documents, can be known (Luke 12:47; Colossians 1:9), understood (Ephesians 5:17), and tested or proved (Romans 12:2; Thayer, 154). By the apostles and other guided spokesmen, the objective will of God was fully proclaimed (Acts 20:27). It is a teaching (John 7:17), which must be obeyed (Matthew 7:21; Ephesians 6:6; Hebrews 10:36; 13:21; 1 John 2:17), and not rejected (Luke 7:30). By this holy will we are sanctified (1 Thessalonians 4:3; Hebrews 10:10), and thus prepared for the Creator's presence. May our prayer sincerely be: “Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth” (Matthew 6:10). And may Christ's precedent be our guide: “[N]ot my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42).

The Plan of God

The will of God, as discussed above, was carefully and progressively implemented over the centuries by means of a sacred plan. Even before the “foundation of the world” the Creator knew how he would accomplish his purposes (Ephesians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:19-20). In his Roman letter Paul wrote: “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose” (8:28, RSV).

The Greek term rendered “purpose” is prothesis, which signifies a “setting forth.” Redemptively, it has to do with the divine “plan, purpose, resolve, will” (Arndt and Gingrich, 713). It is not, as Calvinists allege, God's eternal decree to save only certain “elect” individuals (MacArthur 1991, 487). To the contrary, in the eternal order of things, the gospel plan of salvation, with its varying elements, was “set before” the divine Mind.

The plan included:

1. the knowledge of human digression from the original will of God;
2. preparation for the coming of Christ;
3. the provisional sacrifice of the Lord's atoning death;
4. the proclamation of a system of deliverance for our wayward race;
5. the necessity of man's response to the requirements of that plan (2 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Peter 4:17).

Paul calls it the “plan of the ages” (a literal translation), enacted by the work of Christ (Ephesians 3:11; cf. 2 Timothy 1:9).

God's plan of righteousness is incrementally set forth in a marvelous context in Romans 3:21ff. The following constituents are detailed:

(1) The plan by which God accounts man as righteous is not accomplished by perfect obedience to a law system. Justification by means of a legal code demands complete submission in "all things"—which frail human beings simply cannot attain (Galatians 3:10-11). This, however, does not negate the need to obey God in things required.

(2) Heaven's plan for the remedy of sin was foretold by the prophets (cf. Isaiah 53).

(3) The gospel system is one of a "faith" that is focused on Jesus Christ, and is available universally to all sinners (Jew or Gentile) who are willing to "believe." This belief is not merely a mental disposition; rather, it is a solid conviction based upon historical data, combined with a willingness to trust and obey (see Thayer's comments on the verb "believe," 511; see [Belief as Used in the Book of Acts](#)).

(4) The plan allows the obedient believer to be viewed as one who has been justified. The justification is not merited or earned, but is freely bestowed as a result of divine grace (see the above section on "Grace").

(5) The redemption is enacted, i.e., realized as a result of the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus Christ (cf. Ephesians 3:11; Earl 1997, 308). The Lord became a "propitiation" (hilasterion; cf. "mercy seat" in Hebrews 9:5) for sin. His blood—a symbol of his sinless life (cf. Leviticus 17:11; 1 Peter 1:19)—was poured out for sinners (Isaiah 53:10, 12; Matthew 26:28). Moreover, by means of this propitious offering, the infliction of divine wrath can be avoided (Cottrell 1996, 260-261).

(6) The sacrifice of his perfect Son allowed the Holy God (Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8) to satisfy his sense of justice (Psalm 89:14; Isaiah 53:11), and at the same time attribute justification (vindication) to all who submit to the Lord Jesus (cf. Hebrews 5:8-9).

Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift (2 Corinthians 9:15).

But there is another matter that needs brief attention: will the sacred plan be successful in the final analysis? From the human vantage point alone, one might be inclined to answer negatively, since, according to the testimony of Christ, a greater number will be lost than will be saved (Matthew 7:13-14). Man, however, whose intelligence scarcely ranks beyond the imbecilic—when compared to God (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:25)—is hardly qualified to assess this controversy.

After his crushing education at the hand of the Almighty in which his ignorance was humiliatingly exposed, Job was forced to acknowledge that "no purpose" of the Lord can be "restrained" (Job 42:2). King Jehoshaphat noted that no one "is able to withstand" Jehovah (2 Chronicles 20:6). And Isaiah said, "For Jehovah of hosts hath purposed, and who shall annul it? and his hand is stretched out, and who shall turn it back?" (14:27). In the face of these declarations, shall it be affirmed that God has failed? What arrogance! Apparently the success of Heaven's plan is not to be measured statistically.

But there is scriptural testimony which indirectly suggests that Jehovah's plan will not be thwarted by human rebellion. When the net of Christ's kingdom was cast into the sea, it gathered many kinds, and "was filled" (Matthew 13:48), which may well suggest the ultimate accomplishment of Heaven's redemptive purpose (Coffman 1968, 203). Again, when God's servants have concluded their work in inviting guests to the sacred marriage feast, the wedding will be "filled" (Matthew 22:10; cf. Luke 14:23).

Additionally, there is the explicit testimony of Paul. In his letter to the Ephesians he spoke of the "eternal plan," which God "accomplished" (NIV; McCord) in Christ Jesus (3:11). The Greek verb derives from poieo, to "make" or to "do." "Paul has more than the conception and predetermination in mind here. He is concerned with its historical realization (NEB has 'achieved')" (Wood 1978, 48). The holy plan has not failed; rather, it has been realized in the mission of Christ (RSV; cf. Earl, 308).

Someone has well quipped that we can know who is victorious in the struggle of earth's history by simply turning to the back of the book, i.e., the Bible, and reading how the story ends. God wins! The message of the book of Revelation is that of victory for the divine cause.

A key word in the Apocalypse is “overcome.” It translates the Greek word *nikao*—used twenty-seven times in the New Testament (seventeen of which are in the final book). Both the Lamb and his people are victorious finally (cf. 5:5; 12:11; 17:14; 21:7).











Moreover, in a brilliant twist of irony, God even manipulates the forces of evil to bring about ultimate good. In the motif of Revelation, the “ten horns” and the “beast” war against the “harlot” to destroy her. But note this inspired observation: “For God did put in their hearts to do his mind, and to come to one mind, and to give their kingdom unto the beast, until the words of God should be accomplished” (17:17). Checkmate!

Here is a final point upon which to reflect: the Scriptures nowhere attempt to conceal the reality that “many” will be lost. Rather, repeatedly they emphasize this sobering truth. This itself is a clue to the proposition that the success of the divine plan is not to be judged quantitatively, but rather qualitatively. (Note: This is also an evidence of Bible inspiration. No strictly human author would have left this “problem” unresolved. The various theories of “universal” salvation are evidence of this.)

And so, in some yet-to-be-appreciated sense—surely quite beyond our present capacity to fathom—the Lord’s operation among the children of men eventually will be seen to be entirely glorious (cf. Revelation 5:11-14). It matters not how the situation currently appears. At the time of judgment, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of the Father (Romans 14:11; cf. Philippians 2:10-11). The “score-keepers” will be silenced, and “all the tribes of the earth shall mourn over him” (Revelation 1:7).

How multifaceted God’s wonderful righteousness is. The honest soul can only fall before him and worship!

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