

Doctrine of the Wrath of God

BY R.V.G. TASKER - *This is the first part of a lecture that was given in Cambridge for the Tyndale Fellowship in 1951. At that time R.V.G. Tasker was Professor of New Testament Exegesis in the University of London. Part two will be published in Themelios 26.3.*

The Manifestation of the Divine Wrath to Those Outside the Covenant

The *locus classicus* in Scripture for the manifestation of the divine wrath to the heathen world is [Romans 1:19–32](#). Here Paul insists that the non-Jewish world cannot offer the excuse that it has no knowledge of God because it has not been favored with the special revelation granted to Israel, and that therefore it is quite undeservedly the object of his wrath. For, though invisible to the eye of man, God has manifested through his created works ‘his everlasting power and divinity’. It is evident, in other words, that the power which made the sun, the moon and the stars is an *eternal* power possessing the qualities of perfection and deity. In a real sense, therefore, the pagan world had knowledge of God; but the sin, which is inherent in every child of Adam, led men to fall to deduce from this knowledge the obligation which was laid upon them to glorify and render praise and thanksgiving to the Creator. Their knowledge of God became, as a result, so perverted that in [Ephesians 2:12](#) Paul can describe them as being without God altogether, *atheoi en tōi kosmōi*, though in that *kosmos*, God’s everlasting power and divinity were visible. For, when men exchange such truth about God as has been manifested to them for a false conception of his character, they lose the sense of the fundamental difference between creature and Creator; and thereby fall into the cardinal sin of idolatry and give the creature the worship that should be given only to the Creator. They ‘turn his glory into the similitude of a calf that eateth hay’ (see [Ps. 106:20](#)). And to be an idolater, whatever form the idolatry may take, is to be under the wrath of God.

Because the entry of sin into the world was due to the unwillingness of Adam to accept his creaturely estate, and to his desire to become as God, the wrath of God has been directed against mankind ever since. 'He doth not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men' ([Lam. 3:33](#)); but so and only so can his sovereignty be vindicated. One of the primary purposes therefore of the opening chapters of Genesis, even though the actual expression 'the wrath of God' does not occur in them, is to record the divine judgements and punishments which God was impelled to inflict upon men in order that his absolute sovereignty and justice might be demonstrated. The pronouncement of the sentence of death upon Adam, the cursing of the earth for his sake, and the banishment of Adam and Eve from the earthly paradise are all manifestations in word and deed of the divine wrath; and, it is important to notice, *they are recognized as such by other writers of Scripture*. The Psalmist for example, when he meditates on the inescapable fact of death, says 'We are consumed in thine anger, and in thy wrath are we troubled.' ([Ps. 90:7](#)). It is 'in Adam', Paul says, 'that all die'. 'Death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the likeness of Adam's transgression', *i.e.* over those who had not disobeyed specific commandments as Adam did, but whose heart was nevertheless as a result of Adam's fall desperately wicked ([Rom. 5:14](#)). The effects of the curse laid upon the earth for Adam's sake are destined, Paul points out, to remain till the final manifestation of the sons of God: for the groaning and travailing creation, with its marks of frustration, change, and decay, is what it is because it has been deliberately subjected to vanity by its Creator ([Rom. 8:20](#)). As R. Haldane commented, 'The same creation which declares that there is a God and publishes his glory, also proves that he is the enemy of sin and the avenger of the crimes of men, so that the revelation of wrath is universal throughout the world and none can plead ignorance of it'.³

The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the earthly Paradise led directly, in the Genesis story, to that succession of evils which, Paul enumerates as characteristic of human life in [Romans 1:29](#) and 30. Special attention is drawn in this record of the earliest days of human existence to the destructive nature of sin in the murder of Abel by

Cain, the first of many Biblical illustrations of the truth that ‘the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God’ ([Jas. 1:2](#)); to the inherent restlessness of man as he becomes ‘a fugitive and a wanderer over the face of the earth; and to the incestuous marriage of ‘the sons of God and the daughters of men’, a violation of the order of creation which God had established which resulted in wickedness so great that ‘God repented that he had made man upon the earth’, and was moved to destroy by water the whole race of men with the exception of Noah and seven others. In the Biblical perspective this is the most significant example of the divine wrath in the pre-Christian era: it is a manifestation of the judgement of God so outstanding that it has no parallel except the judgement which God will pass upon sinners on the final ‘day of his wrath’. Not merely does the second Epistle of Peter draw attention to this parallel in the words ‘the world that then was, being overflowed with water perished; but the heavens that now are, and the earth ... have been stored up for fire, being reserved against the day of judgement and destruction of ungodly men’ ([2 Pet. 3:6, 7](#)), but the Son of God himself places these two judgements side by side when he says: ‘As were the days of Noah, so shall be the coming of the Son of Man’ ([Matt. 24:37](#)).

In the mercy of God a new beginning seemed possible for mankind after the salvation of Noah and his family; and it is probable that Scripture implies that Noah made known to his contemporaries a fresh revelation of the sovereign justice of God, for he is described in [2 Peter 2:5](#) as ‘a preacher of righteousness’. But the inherent pride of man led him once again to forget his creaturely estate and to seek to obliterate the distance between heaven and earth, *i.e.* between God and himself, by the erection of the tower of Babel. Trading upon the mercy of God revealed in the salvation from the flood, men succeeded only in evoking a fresh expression of the divine wrath, which resulted in the confusion of human speech and in the rise of the numerous languages which have caused so much misunderstanding and been such a divisive factor in human life.

It is clear from these opening chapters of Genesis not only that the wrath of God manifests itself especially in the confounding of human

pride whenever it asserts itself, and in the inflicting of suffering and death as just punishments; but also that man by sinning is plunged into further sin and into all the misery and distress which sin brings in its train. This is the truth to which Paul gives explicit utterance in the last section of the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, to which we must now return.

The various acts of uncleanness mentioned by the apostle in [Romans 1:24–27](#), some of them the very acts which led to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, ‘which the Lord overthrew in his anger and his wrath’ ([Deut. 29:23](#)), are the effects both of the idolatry which brings down upon mankind the wrath of God, and of the essential corruption of the human heart. Paul speaks in these verses of God giving men up to ‘uncleanness’ and to ‘vile passions’. God is therefore directly operative in this process of moral decline, though he is not responsible for moral evil. We should do well to bear in mind the comment of Haldane on this difficult passage. ‘We must distinguish’, he wrote, between man’s abandonment by God and the awful effects of the abandonment. The abandonment proceeded from divine justice but the effect from the corruption of man, in which God had no part. The abandonment is a negative act of God, or rather negation of acting, of which God is absolutely master, since being under no obligation to confer grace upon any man, he is free to withhold it as he sees good, so that in this withholding there is no injustice’. There comes a point at which ‘God ceases to strive with man any longer’ (see [Gen. 6:3](#)).

The reason why sins of moral uncleanness are given such prominence in this section of Romans is probably not merely because they were especially prevalent in the Roman world at the time when the Epistle was written, but because they are the sins which are so often directly associated with idolatry. The truth thus becomes apparent that when man degrades God he also degrades himself beneath the level of the beasts. The apostle accordingly states in verse 28, ‘Even as they refused to have God in their knowledge, God gave them up unto a reprobate mind, to do the things which are not fitting’; which Hodge well paraphrased, bringing out the play on the

Greek words: 'As they did not approve of God, he gave them over to a mind which no one could approve'.

In the light of the language used in this first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans it is unsatisfactory to limit the meaning of the 'wrath of God' in the NT solely to the effects which follow upon sinful actions. We feel, therefore, the inadequacy of such a statement as that of Professor C.H. Dodd that 'Paul retains the concept of "the wrath of God" not to describe the attitude of God to man but to describe the inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe'.⁴ 'The wrath of God', as has been well said, 'is an *affectus* as well as an *effectus*, a quality of the nature of God, an attitude of the mind of God towards evil'.

Throughout this section of Romans emphasis is laid upon the essential justice of God's dealings with the heathen. The exhibitions of his wrath are not arbitrary, for God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked ([Ezek. 33:11](#)), nor are they made for any other purpose except to vindicate his sovereign rights as Creator. Men have fully merited the misery which their sin has brought upon them. 'Knowing', Paul states in 1:32, 'the ordinance of God, that they which practice such things are worthy of death, [they] not only do the same, but also consent with them that practice them'. Their conscience, as is made clear in 2:14, though dulled by the moral corruption into which they have sunk, has not obliterated the knowledge that they are moral beings with a moral sense; for they pass moral judgements upon one another, 'their thoughts one with another accusing or else excusing them'. This is evidence that, though they have no special revelation of a moral law such as has been revealed to Israel, they possess by nature a knowledge of the difference between right and wrong. They are in a real sense 'a law unto themselves; in that they show the work of the law [the moral law] written in their hearts', however much they may fail to act in accordance with its dictates.

The essential truth of the matter therefore is that though men possess by nature a moral sense they have in fact not only failed to glorify God and to act in a manner pleasing to him, but have become incapable of

doing so because of the sin resident in their members. They are therefore, to use the language of [Romans 9:22](#), ‘vessels of wrath fitted unto destruction’. To this truth witness is again borne by the apostle in [Ephesians 2:3](#) where he states that he himself and his fellow-Jewish Christians were, apart from the grace of God received at their conversion, *tekna physei orgēs* by their very nature the objects of God’s wrath, as were the rest of mankind. There has been a manifest reluctance on the part of modern commentators to give this expression its obvious positive meaning. Some indeed, because of the absence of the word *theou* after *orgēs* have supposed that Paul is saying no more than that the Gentiles were liable to violent bursts of *human* anger. Such an interpretation would not only strip the passage of its obvious solemnity, but the words would add little to the previous clause; and there are several places in the NT where the word *orgē* seems to refer to God’s wrath even though the word ‘God’ is not mentioned. Other commentators, who recognize that the reference is to the divine anger, seem anxious to tone down as much as possible the meaning of *physei*. Thus Armitage Robinson interprets the expression negatively and paraphrases it by words ‘in ourselves’, *i.e.* because we lacked divine grace. But the word *physis* should refer to what is innate or ingrained and not to something which is due to a defect caused by particular conditions or circumstances. In this passage therefore it draws attention to the essential constitution of fallen man, which is both the cause of the evil practices into which he has sunk, and the means by which they are persistently maintained. Just as by virtue of the original creation in the image of God men are endowed with moral sense and the gift of conscience, as Paul has stated in 2:14; so too because of their fallen nature they are inevitably involved in behavior which renders them the objects of the divine wrath. The conclusion therefore is that, apart from the gospel, all mankind that is engendered of the seed of Adam is *tekna physei orgēs*. ‘God’s displeasure’, as Knox translates [Ephesians 2:3](#), ‘is their birthright’.

¹ All quotations are from the Revised Version unless otherwise stated.

² Lactantius; *De Ira Dei* (ch., 22): *Possem dicere quod ira hominis refraenanda fuerit, quia in iuste saepe irascitur, et praesens habet motum, quia temporalis est ... deus autem non ad praesens irascitur quia aeternus est praelectusque virtutis et nunquam nisi merito irascitur.*

³ *The Epistle to the Romans*, 55.

⁴ *The Epistle to the Romans*, 23.

⁵ Paul does not accuse the Jew of 'idolatry' because since the exile idolatry had become increasingly abhorrent to Israel. In the OT, however, idolatry, particularly in the form of Baal-worship, had again and again provoked the Holy One of Israel 'to anger'. (See [Deut. 32:16, 21, 29:24–28.](#))

⁶ *agei* in the expression *eis metanoian se agei* should be interpreted as a conative present. 'The goodness of God is intended to lead thee to repentance.'

⁷ The participle *thelōn* in this verb I assume to be causative and not concessive.

⁸ G.W. Wade's paraphrase of [Nahum 3:4, 5](#) in *A New Commentary on Holy Scripture*, 592.