

The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God

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The Manifestation of the Wrath of God Under the Old Covenant

In the last half of the second chapter of the Epistle to the Romans Paul is concerned to show that the children of Abraham, who in virtue of their privileges as the chosen people of God were apt to assume that they had a right to pass judgement on the rest of mankind, so far from being exempt from the wrath of God which is the birthright of every child of Adam, were especially the objects of it. Bearing the name of Jew, resting his confidence upon the Mosaic law and the superior knowledge which it gave him of divine things, conscious that his vocation was to be a guide of the morally unenlightened and the ethically immature, 'an instructor of the foolish and a teacher of babes', the Israelite was in fact the victim of that self-deception which blunts a man's sense of the reality and the gravity of his own sin. The apostle, it would appear, is thinking in Romans 2:16–19 not merely of the Israelites of his own day, but of the Israelites throughout the whole of their past history, which has shown them to be guilty of the very sins which they condemn in others. Paul here specifies some of these sins which can be illustrated in detail in the OT.

For all his alleged horror of stealing, the Israelite had often been guilty of such things as dishonest trading, which is a violation of the eighth commandment, 'making the ephah small, and the shekel great, and dealing falsely with balances of deceit' (Rom. 2:21; Amos 8:5). For all

their professed abhorrence of adultery, the sin of David with Bathsheba stood as a standing record of the fact that the best of Israelites had committed the sin which was recognized as a characteristic sin of heathendom; and because he had given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, David had inevitably incurred his wrath (2 Sam. 12:14). Moreover, God had protested through the mouth of Jeremiah that the response of his people to his goodness had been to turn the very prosperity which he had given them into an instrument for the committal of this particular sin. 'When I had fed them to the full, they committed adultery, and assembled themselves in troops at the harlots' houses. They were as fed horses in the morning: every one neighed after his neighbor's wife. Shall I not visit for these things' saith the Lord: and shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this?' (Rom. 2:21; Jer. 5:7-9).

For all his detestation of idolatry the Israelite was guilty, Paul assents, of 'robbing temples',⁵ even, it would seem, the temple of his own God! For had not God through Malachi denounced the laxity with which the Israelites performed the sacrifices demanded by the ritual laws of the old covenant in the words 'Will a man rob God? yet ye rob me. But ye say. Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with the curse; for ye rob me, even this whole nation' (Rom. 2:22; Mal. 3:8, 9)? For all his glorying in the law, the Israelite, by transgressing it, had dishonored the God who gave it, particularly in the eyes of the surrounding nations, amongst whom his lot had been cast (Rom. 2:23; Ezek. 36:20, 23). And for all his pride in being circumcised the Israelite had tended to forget that there was no inherent security in circumcision against God's wrath. Circumcision was a sign or seal of the covenant; but, if the moral obligations imposed by the covenant were disregarded, circumcision was as unavailing as uncircumcision (Rom. 2:25). Nor did membership of the visible congregation of Israel necessarily carry with it membership of the true Israel, in which something more was required from the worshipper than the punctilious observance of the letter of the law. God demanded an inner worship of the heart such as he alone could recognize and appraise (Rom. 2:28, 29).

Throughout the series of dramatic rhetorical questions in the closing verses of Romans 2 Paul is, in effect, drawing attention to the truth that those who prided themselves on being the people of God, were even more subject to the divine wrath than those who were outside the privileges of the divine covenant. For 'to whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required: and to whom they commit much, of him will they ask the more' (Luke 12:48). The judgement which 'begins at the house of God' (1 Pet. 4:17) is for that very reason more searching and severe. The tragedy was that the Israelite had never really recognized his sin and was too ready to class the rest of mankind as sinners. The pathetic trust which in Paul's day he had come to place in the outward and visible signs of his religion, was the climax of the continuous spiritual decline depicted in the OT.

As he surveys the story of Israel Paul is led, it would seem, to ask why this moral decline was not, and indeed could not be, arrested in spite of the punishments which God in his wrath had again and again inflicted upon his people, and in spite of the fact that in the law of Moses (that unique gift of God to Israel) a great revelation of the wrath of God against sin had been made; for, as Paul says in Romans 4:15, 'the law worketh wrath'. Just because it requires perfect obedience to its commands, it must at the same time, by the very penalties it exacts for disobedience, render the offender more subject to the divine wrath. Paul concludes that the main reason for the failure of Israel to arrest this process of moral decline lay in its wrong reaction to the forbearance of God, when so often he refrained from punishing them to the extent they deserved. When God, in the words of Psalms 50:21, had 'kept silence' after the covenant had been violated by wickedness in Israel (and the sins which the Psalmist mentions in the previous verses of this Psalm are precisely those enumerated by Paul in this passage of Romans), the Israelites fondly supposed, as we have already noticed, that God was 'even such a one as themselves', easy-going and tolerant of evil. Failing to understand that his goodness in delaying to inflict full punishment and to execute his wrath to the uttermost was designed solely to give further opportunity for repentance (Rom. 2:4⁶), they despised 'the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering', and concluded that he was never

going to 'make a full end'. How often, as soon as he turned away his anger, remembering that they were but flesh, had they proceeded to 'turn again and tempt God and provoke the Holy One of Israel' (Ps. 78:38–40)! They had disregarded the prophets who assured them that just because God was 'gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy, and repented him of the evil' (*i.e.* refused to display at present his wrath to the uttermost) they should 'rend their hearts ... and turn unto the Lord their God' (Joel 2:13). And because 'they mocked God's messengers, and despised his words and scoffed at his prophets' the wrath of God arose against his people till 'there was no remedy' (2 Chr. 36:16).

Paul also insists, in the same way as the chronicler of old, that this abuse of God's mercies, so far from staying the avenging hand of God, must result in an accumulation of offences which will finally receive in full the punishment they deserve. If men fail to use the opportunities for repentance; if they persist hardening their hearts as Pharaoh hardened his heart; and if, in spite of the fact that God has 'stretched out his hand all the day long' to them (Is. 65:2) they remain a rebellious people, then their hard and impenitent hearts are treasuring up for themselves wrath in the final day of wrath and of the righteous judgement of God (see Rom. 2:5). This is the only *abiding* wealth that the wicked possess. It is not because God has laid aside his wrath, but because he has willed to show his wrath and make his power known on the great 'day of wrath' that he has 'endured with much longsuffering vessels of wrath fitted unto destruction' (Rom. 9:22^r). In that final display of wrath his righteousness will be vindicated and his name glorified. The goodness of God can never therefore secure impunity to sinners; and their abuse of it must of necessity aggravate their guilt and their punishment.

Both the evidence then of the OT and the state of the Jews in Paul's own day bore witness to the truth that Jews as well as Gentiles were the object of the divine wrath, from which nothing but the salvation wrought by Jesus Christ could rescue them; for 'none was righteous, no not a single one' (Rom. 3:10). Those who receive special

knowledge of God and are the peculiar objects of his love must also, as the prophets insisted, be the special objects of his wrath if they disregard that knowledge and despise that love. 'You only', says God through Amos, 'have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities' (Amos 3:2). And Amos proceeds to describe in chapter four some of the ways in which God would 'Visit the transgressions of Israel upon him'. Moreover once God has decided to execute his wrath upon his people nothing that they can do can withstand it. So Ezekiel prophesies the futility of any defense by the inhabitants of Jerusalem against the Babylonians; for the downfall of the city has been decreed by God. The inhabitants of Jerusalem have indeed made preparations for defense, but they lack courage to face the enemy just because the wrath of God has predetermined their defeat. 'They have blown the trumpet, and have made all ready; but none goeth to the battle: for my wrath is upon all the multitude thereof' (Ezek. 7:14). 'Who', asked the Psalmist 'may stand in thy sight, when once thou art angry?' (Ps. 76:7).

It was not however to be inferred from this long story of a disobedient and backsliding people that God's election of Israel to be a chosen instrument of his purpose had failed. If there was no ground for any boastful sense of superiority on the part of the Jew, so too there was no ground for any boasting on the part of the Gentile. God's plan for the salvation of his elect could not be rendered void either by the disobedience of the chosen people; or by the arrogance of their oppressors; or by those whom God had called to be the instruments of his avenging wrath, but who had boasted of their own strength and assumed glory for themselves. If his anger is kindled against his own people, it is also kindled against those who sought to prevent the execution of his will for Israel. An outstanding instance of such an attempt to thwart the purposes of God is the stubbornness of Pharaoh. Yet the hardening of Pharaoh's heart and the subsequent punishment inflicted upon him were the means by which God's power was shown and his name published abroad in the earth (see Rom. 9:17; Exod. 4:16). Similarly because 'Amalek set himself against Israel in the way when he came out of Egypt' Saul is bidden to be the minister of God's avenging wrath by smiting Amalek and utterly destroying 'all that they

have' (1 Sam. 15:2, 3). And when Saul disobeys this command by sparing Agag and the best of the spoils he learns that he himself has become hostile to the Lord because 'he did not execute the fierce wrath upon Amalek' (1 Sam. 28:18). 'The kings of the earth who take counsel together against the Lord', said the Psalmist, 'shall be had in derision by the Lord, who will speak unto them in his wrath and vex them in his sore displeasure' (see Ps. 2:1–5).

As for those whom God had summoned to inflict punishment upon Israel, such as the Assyrians, God speaks to them through Isaiah in this fashion: 'Ho Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, the staff in whose hand is mine indignation! I will send him against a profane nation and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets'; but the prophecy continues: 'I will punish ... the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks. For he hath said, By the strength of my hand have I done it, and by my wisdom; for I am prudent' (Is. 20:5, 6, 12, 13).

The prophecy of Nahum, which predicts the destruction of Nineveh the Assyrian capital, whose crimes have merited its downfall, is prefaced by a remarkable introductory poem descriptive of the manifestation of God's wrath in the convulsions of nature. 'The Lord is a jealous God and avengeth; the Lord avengeth and is full of wrath; the Lord taketh vengeance on his adversaries ... the Lord hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebuketh the sea, and maketh it dry, and drieth up all the rivers ... The mountains quake at him, and the hills melt; and the earth is upheaved at his presence ... Who can stand before his indignation? and who can abide in the fierceness of his anger?' (Nah. 1:2–6). This wrath is soon to be turned against Nineveh 'the bloody city ... all full of lies and rapine'. Because 'the prey departeth not' and Nineveh is always plundering, it will itself be the prey of the plunderer. Because 'through the glamour of its power and the speciousness of its statecraft it has seduced to their ruin the peoples that entered into relations with it ... it will undergo degradation parallel to that inflicted upon an unchaste woman'.⁸ Similarly, when Habakkuk complained to God that the

Chaldeans whom God had raised up to punish his people were themselves a wicked people, he was told that, because the soul of the Chaldean was puffed up and not upright in him (see Hab. 2:4); and because he had used his victories as occasions for evil gain and tyrannous oppression, he too would become the object of the divine wrath. The third chapter of Habakkuk contains a poem descriptive of God marching forth to execute his wrath 'against all peoples who thwart his purposes'. Thou didst march through the land in indignation, thou didst thresh the nations in anger. Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people, for the salvation of thine anointed' (Hab. 3:12, 13). Another very vivid description of God's vengeance upon the enemies of Israel is to be found in Isaiah 63:1–6. The prophet sees God coming 'from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah' stained with the blood of his enemies; and God tells him that he alone 'in the greatness of his strength' could so succour his people in their distress. 'I have trodden the winepress alone; ... yea, I trod them in mine anger, and trampled them in my fury; and their lifeblood is sprinkled upon my garments ... For the day of vengeance was in mine heart, and the year of my redeemed is come'.

These last two passages remind us that, though God's people deserve and receive in part punishment at the hands of God, who is angry when faced with sin, and who must give expression through his anger to his sovereignty and his justice, nevertheless in his dealings with Israel under the covenant relationship he is concerned to make ready the way (if need be by the extermination of his enemies) for the execution of his plan for the salvation of his elect. The love of God does not eliminate his wrath, but it prevents him from giving *full* expression to it in his dealings with Israel. In his loving mercy he has chosen Israel to be a peculiar people, the people of the covenant; and that covenant relationship can never be abandoned till a new covenant has been established. However much Israel may sin, it was called out of Egypt to be the son of God's love (Hos. 11:1). Samaria, the city where Israel dwelt, could never therefore become as Sodom or as one of the cities of the Plain. Such is the burden of God's tender pleadings in Hosea 11:8 ff.: 'How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? How shall I deliver thee, Israel? How shall I make thee as Admah?

How shall I set thee as Zeboim? Mine heart is turned within me, my compassions are kindled together. I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim: for I am God and not man’.

But the most tender, perhaps, of all such expressions of God’s love for Israel, which leads him to refuse to abandon the covenant relationship with his chosen people, and necessitates a limitation of his anger, is that contained in Isaiah 54:8, 10: ‘In overflowing wrath I hid my face from thee *for a moment*; but with *everlasting* kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy redeemer ... For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall my covenant of peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.’ Or, as the same truth is expressed in Micah 7:18, ‘He retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy.’

We can sum up this part of our study by saying that under the old covenant the nature of sin was made clear; and men were forced by the destructive manifestations of God’s power to recognize that his attitude towards sin can only be one of wrath. The old covenant could not, however, save men from sin, nor put them right with God. But when through the revelation given in the law and the prophets, and through the unmistakable signs of the divine wrath in the providential ordering of human affairs, God had revealed himself in his absolute sovereignty, his perfect holiness, and his unfailing justice,—then the old covenant had done its work, and the way was open for the establishment of the new. In other words, when the truth had at least partially been learned, as Job eventually learned it, in the bitter school of suffering, that man must not contend with God his Maker; that all human pride must be crushed before him who reveals himself in the whirlwind; and that the sinner must be humiliated and ‘abhor himself and repent in dust and ashes’ (Job 42:6),—then the infinite pity and mercy of God, of which the OT so often speaks, could break through into human history in the person of his incarnate Son. In Jesus the loving purposes of God set forth in the OT, come finally to fulfilment; but not, let us notice, by any abandonment of the reality of his wrath or

by any refusal to display it. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is the same God who challenged Job to pour forth, if he could, the overflowing's of his anger, and look upon every one that is proud and abase him and bring him low (see Job 40:11, 12). To manifest anger effectively against the pride which constitutes human sin is still, and must always be, the sole prerogative of almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our next task therefore must be to see how in Jesus Christ we have a revelation from heaven not only of the goodness, but also of the severity of God.

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 praeceptusque 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.