

The Biblical 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.*

Preface

In this lecture I have endeavored to draw attention to some of the Biblical evidence, present in both the Old and New Testaments, which reveals God as a God of wrath as well as a God of love. It is an axiom of the Bible that there is no incompatibility between these two attributes of the divine nature; indeed for the most part the great Christian theologians and preachers of the past have endeavored to be loyal to both sides of the divine self-disclosure. In more recent years, however, there has been widespread neglect and indeed denial of the doctrine of the divine wrath; and emphasis has been placed almost exclusively upon the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. In consequence the severity of Biblical Christianity has largely been lost sight of, with far-reaching and disastrous results in many spheres of life, as Dr D.M. Lloyd Jones in his book *The Plight of Men and the Power of God* has clearly shown. It is surely time that the balance was redressed, and that a generation which has little or no fear of God should be faced with the reality of his wrath as well as with his loving-kindness.

The so-called 'moral' objection to the doctrine of the divine wrath has no substance when it is realized that the Bible, containing as it does a revelation of God to *man*, must use the language of the human emotions in speaking of God; but that, just because God is God and not man, divine love transcends human love, and divine wrath transcends human wrath. There is in the love of God none of the fickleness, the waywardness, and the weakness of human love; and these features are also absent from his wrath. But just as human love is deficient if the element of anger is entirely lacking (for as Lactantius wrote in the third century, *qui non odit diligit*), so too is anger an essential element of divine love. God's love is inseparably connected with his holiness and his justice. He must therefore manifest anger when confronted with sin and evil.

The doctrine of the wrath of God safeguards the essential distinction between Creator and creature, which sin is ever seeking to minimize or obliterate. Without a realization of this wrath we are unlikely to have that 'fear of God which is the beginning of wisdom'. It is with a consciousness of this truth, and with a desire to be faithful to the biblical revelation as a whole, that I offer this study as a contribution to the series of Tyndale Lectures.

Introduction

Our investigation into the Biblical doctrine of the wrath of God should, I suggest, begin with a careful exegesis of Romans 1:18. In this verse the apostle writes, 'for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold down the truth in unrighteousness'.¹ The main points at issue in the interpretation of these words are, first, whether the sentence is co-ordinate with the previous sentence; and, secondly, what is the exact significance of the present tense 'is revealed'. On the supposition that the two sentences are co-ordinate, verse 18 would supply another reason why Paul is 'not ashamed of the gospel'. He is unashamed, because in it a revelation is made not only of the righteousness but also of the wrath of God. In favor of this view, it has been suggested that the form of the two sentences suggests parallelism; and that, on the assumption that it is in the gospel alone that God's wrath is adequately revealed, there is no contradiction between 1:18 and the further statement of the apostle in 3:25 that 'God set forth [Jesus] to be a propitiation, ... because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime, in the forbearance of God'. The revisers were almost certainly right in translating *dia tēn paresin* in this verse, 'because of passing over of sins' and not, as the AV (following the Vulgate *propter remissionem*) translated, 'for the remission of sins', *i.e.* 'in order to bring about the remission of sins'; for although the word *paresis* is used once in secular literature for the remission of debts, there is no evidence that it is a synonym for *aphesis*. In the light of the RV translation of Romans 3:25, it is accordingly urged that in Romans 1:18 also the apostle is saying that before the redemptive activity of Christ there was no full expression of God's wrath. In other words the peculiar characteristic of the whole pre-Christian era was that God in his forbearance tended to overlook the transgressions of men and not to inflict on them the full punishment that they merited. But because he is absolutely righteous such a *paresis hamartēmatēn* could not be permanent. Sooner or later it was inevitable that he should manifest to the *full* his divine

wrath, particularly as many were misunderstanding the nature and purpose of his forbearance, and were fondly supposing that ‘such a one as themselves’ (Ps. 50:21),—an easy-going God, who would forget their offences and so remit them. Hence it was necessary, ‘because God had passed over the sins done aforetime’, to show his righteousness by ‘setting forth Jesus to be a propitiation’: and it is this truth, so it is alleged, which is also presented in the apostle’s words in 1:18.

Such an interpretation of 1:18 is also said to be consistent with two statements found in addresses delivered by Paul before pagan audiences; the first at Lystra, in Acts 14:16, that God ‘in the generations gone by suffered all the nations to walk in their own ways’; and the second at Athens, in Acts 17:30, that ‘the times of ignorance therefore God overlooked’. It is also said that in accordance with the Septuagint version of Jeremiah 31:32 quoted in Hebrews 8:9, where God says, They continued not in my covenant, and I disregarded them *emēlēsa autōn*. But while this is certainly the right exegesis of Romans 3:25, where the apostle is obviously drawing attention to the necessity for the full satisfaction of the divine justice in the propitiatory sacrifice of Jesus, just because that justice had in fact never been fully satisfied before (for God had to use the language of the prophets, never ‘made a full end’ in the infliction of punishment on his people), I would suggest that such an interpretation of Romans 1:18 does not really fit the context. The RV is surely right in regarding this verse as beginning a new paragraph. Paul is in effect here laying down the essential foundation for the doctrine of grace by a general statement of God’s *permanent* attitude to sin; for it is only when men are fully conscious of this attitude that they are inclined to, or indeed are able to accept the good news of the revelation of God’s righteousness revealed in the saving death of Christ. To realize that we are under God’s wrath and in disgrace is the essential preliminary to the experience of his love and his grace. In this respect the Christian gospel is bad news before it is good news. And this revelation of the divine wrath has been made in varying degrees and in various ways and at various times ever since the fall of Adam. I would therefore interpret *apokalyptetai* in Romans 1:18 not as a prophetic present, ‘is going to be revealed’, with reference to the final and perfect manifestation of the divine wrath on what is called in Romans 2:5 ‘the day of wrath’; nor as a strict present, ‘is at this moment being revealed’, with sole reference to the conditions prevalent in the Roman Empire of Paul’s own day. Nor would I confine it to the revelation of the divine wrath in the passion of Christ when he drank to the dregs on behalf

of sinners the cup of God's wrath. Rather would I construe it as a frequentative present, 'is continually being revealed', covering in its sweep the whole field of human experience, especially that delineated in the OT Scriptures. We may note in passing that this *permanent* element in the divine wrath is a characteristic which differentiates it from sinful human wrath. The latter is fitful, wayward, and spasmodic; while the former is stable, unswerving, and of set purpose. 'Man is a creature of time', wrote Lactantius, 'and his emotions are related to the passing moment. His anger, therefore, ought to be curbed because he is often angry and angry unjustly. But God is eternal and perfect. His anger is no passing emotion but is always of set purpose and design.'² A perfect example of this aspect of *human* anger is given by the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:28). He was angry with the wrong people, at the wrong time, and for the wrong reasons.

Paul adds in Romans 1:18 that this revelation of the divine wrath is made 'from heaven'. He does so perhaps not merely to emphasize still more strongly that this wrath is divine in origin and in character; but also, as Calvin suggested, because it is universal in its scope, for 'so far and wide as are the heavens, is the wrath of God poured out on the whole world'. C. Hodge, in his commentary on Romans, also pertinently suggested that Paul added these words, 'because like the lightning from heaven God's wrath forces itself on the most reluctant vision'. Men may be deaf to the divine voice speaking within them in conscience, but they find it difficult to escape that same voice when it calls to them through the providential 'chances and changes' of their experience.

Paul also adds that this revelation is 'against all impiety and unrighteousness of men who hold down the truth in unrighteousness'. The words translated 'impiety' and 'unrighteousness' *asebeia* and *adikia*, are not synonyms. Rather does the apostle show, by the choice of these particular words and by the order in which he places them, that *adikia*, human injustice, man's inhumanity to man, and the unnatural and worse than bestial behavior to which he often sinks has its deepest roots in *asebeia*, in his failure to give to God the honor and the reverence which the all-sovereign Creator has the right to demand from his creatures. The sin which permanently evokes God's wrath, because it is the root of all other sins, is the willful suppression of such truth about himself as he has been pleased to reveal to men, and of which they can never plead ignorance.

The truth about the divine nature, which is available to *all* men through the evidence of God's created works, is necessarily more limited and circumscribed than the special revelation which he has chosen to make through the particular people whom he called to receive it. It is a revelation of his sovereignty and his creative power rather than of his mercy and his saving grace. We may therefore find it helpful as an aid to handling in a necessarily limited way the large amount of Biblical material relevant to our subject, to consider first the manifestation of the divine wrath to those who are outside the covenant relationship, which God established with his people Israel; then to notice the particular forms which such manifestation took, and the causes which gave rise to them, when God directed his anger to his chosen people; and finally to consider how the divine wrath is revealed in Jesus Christ; under the new covenant which he inaugurated: and on the final Day of Wrath.

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

² Lactantius; *De Ira Dei* (ch., 22): *Possem dicere quod ira hominis refrænanda 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.