



## *The Wrath of God in the New Testament*

**QUESTION:** I have read *A More Christlike God* and would love to believe in your beautiful image of God, but I cannot see how it lines up with the many references to the wrath of God in the New Testament. How do you explain that?

**RESPONSE:** That's a fair question, though I did offer nuanced responses within the book that I can't reiterate in one page.

That said, let's begin with what I did *not* say. At no point did I deny the reality of the wrath of God. Rather, I began with a historic Christian understanding of the phrase and proceeded to both delimit and explain what it does and doesn't (cannot) mean in light of the nature of God revealed in Jesus.

I want to begin by asking what "the wrath of God" cannot mean. The first Christians were unanimous: we cannot attribute vengeful violence fueled by rage to the God who IS love by nature and whose Cross was an explicit repudiation of *literal* wrath. They regarded wrath (violent anger) as a sin and projecting it onto God as blasphemous.

In light of Christ, we ask what "the wrath of God" may mean, according to the Scriptures.

**1. A metaphor for divine consent.** In *AMCG*, I referred to those Bible texts that treat it as a metaphor, defining it as divine consent to our willful choices. Love does not handcuff our agency. Love (God) must patiently "give us over" (Romans 1) to the natural and spiritual consequences of our defiance, including and especially death.

Even the "wrath of the Lamb" in the Book of Revelation (chapter 6) is *of the Lamb*. That is, the wrath is Christ's consent to co-suffering our insatiable appetite for conquest, war and the resulting economic collapse, disease and famine. The Lamb does not cause the chaos. We do.

But neither does he abandon us to the pigpen of our prodigal behavior. Christ enters our world as the Good Shepherd who searches for the lost and perishing sheep, and even when he undergoes our wrath, how does he pay us back? With scandalous grace and hospitality! With radical forgiveness and

the mercy that the Psalms say, "endures forever"!

**2. A synonym for the kingdom of darkness.** A second sense of "the wrath" has nothing to do with God. Its not "the wrath of God" but "the wrath, full-stop" (Romans 5:9) which by Paul's time, became a Jewish synonym for Satan or Hades. However we conceive the kingdom of darkness, the darkness is created whenever humanity collectively or individually turns its back on the Light of God. When we turn our backs on God, we create a shadow and "the enemy" wreaks havoc in the shadow of our turning.

That isn't God. "God is Light and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). What we call "the wrath of God" is really the "wages of sin" (Romans 6:23) but thanks be to God, his response is "the free gift of God, eternal life."

**3. God's consuming restorative judgment.** Finally, the wrath of God is an attribute of divine love. The flames of divine Love are relentless in burning away the dross (Malachi 3:2) or chaff (Luke 3 3:17) or wood, hay and stubble (1 Corinthians 3:12-13) of our false selves. Our sin cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. It must be consumed by the "Refiner's fire."

But what are these flames of the unquenchable love of Christ? They may be experienced in "the fiery furnace" of intense trials (Daniel 3:8-25). But a Christ-centered or gospel reading of such texts reveals that we are not consumed. Only the ropes of our bondage and attachments are burned up. And the oppressors are not actual people who God kills. Rather, God consumes the oppression of our addictions and spiritual enemies.

Even Hebrews 12, which calls God a "consuming fire" (vs. 28), clarifies: every fiery trial is only ever the work of a loving Father (vs. 5-11) with the aim of healing and strengthening his children where they are weak or feeble (vs. 12-13). In this sense, "wrath" is restorative, not destructive. Indeed, Jesus says it can only be "good" for us (Mark 9:49-50). □

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