

CHAPTER FOUR

THE WRATH OF GOD

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A wildly popular topic in Christian literature today is “self-esteem.” By contrast, the subject of sin is often overlooked, or even challenged head-on. To call sin rebellion against God is “shallow and insulting to the human being,” writes one Christian author. As much as I appreciate this individual’s sincerity, I am deeply concerned about the perspective he and many others are advocating. It’s unbiblical. It hinders us from understanding the seriousness of sin, the reality of wrath, and the necessity of the Cross.

Jesus did not go to the Cross to set us free from low self-esteem, but from something far more serious: the wrath of God and the presence, power, and penalty of sin (in which pride, or *excess* self-esteem, plays a huge role in all our lives).

To understand how amazing grace is we must understand the seriousness of sin. To appreciate God’s love necessitates understanding his wrath. Though anything but flattering, a realistic appraisal of our own sinfulness—and its horrifying consequences—is an essential step as we explore the doctrine of justification.

For Further Study:

Enhance an *accurate* view of your self-image (and shatter your self-esteem) by reviewing 1Kings 8:46, Jeremiah 17:9, Romans 3:10-18, 23, and 1John 1:8.

A Glimpse in the Rearview Mirror

“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2Co 5:17). Meditating on the miracle of regeneration gives us real cause to rejoice. Unless we occasionally look in our rearview mirror, however, remembering what we were before God in his mercy regenerated us, our celebration will be superficial. As Martin Luther once said, “A person must confront his own sinfulness in all its ravaging depths before he can enjoy the comforts of salvation.”

- 1** If you were the self-appointed campaign manager for Jesus' "Messiah A.D. '32" bid, which of the following would you edit out of his speeches?
- "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple." (Lk 14:26)
 - "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." (Lk 9:62)
 - "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me." (Mt 5:11)
 - "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." (Lk 9:60)
 - "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (Mt 19:24)
 - "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." (Mt 10:34)
 - "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles." (Mt 5:39,41)
- (Aren't you glad that Jesus wasn't a politician?)

Meditate on Romans

1:28-32. This passage doesn't refer to a select group of the world's worst sinners—it describes the natural state of every person apart from regeneration. See also Ephesians 2:1-3.

In one short verse Paul summarizes the enmity that existed between us and God prior to conversion: "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior" (Col 1:21). The absolute necessity and remarkable benefits of justification should come into focus as we dissect this sobering verse.

Alienated from God. Paul expands this description in his letter to the Ephesian church: "Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ...foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12). We were alienated from God without any sensitivity concerning the reality of sin. As Peter T. O'Brien has stated, we were "continuously and persistently out of harmony with God."¹

Now I doubt you were "continuously and persistently" *aware* of your alienation at the time. Before I was converted I was totally unaware of my estrangement from God. Avidly committed to the partying lifestyle, I was enjoying the passing pleasures of sin. I had little knowledge of or interest in God.

Whether we sensed the separation or not at the time, Scripture states that every individual has a desperate need to be reconciled to God. Our alienation was absolute. Had it not been for God's

merciful intervention, we would have been separated from him for eternity. There was nothing we could have done to alter that alienated state.

Enemies in your mind. A persistent and popular rumor has been circulating for several thousand years now which says man is essentially good. Sure we make mistakes, but overall we're pretty decent folks. Anyone who believes that myth isn't paying attention. As Paul states so clearly to the Colossians, we weren't God's allies or even neutral observers. R.C. Lucas says we were "antagonistic, not merely apathetic."³ Theologian Anthony Hoekema makes the point well in this statement: "Sin is

“ We have a strange illusion that mere time cancels sin. I have heard others and I have heard myself recounting cruelties and falsehoods committed in my boyhood as if they were no concern of the present speakers, and even with laughter, but mere time does nothing either to the fact or the guilt of sin.² ”

— C.S. Lewis

For Further Study:

Read Romans 1:18-21. Can those who have never heard the gospel or read the Bible be accused of being God's enemies?

2 List one or two things you did before becoming a Christian that you would consider good. Then, read Psalm 14:2-3 and Isaiah 64:6, and briefly summarize God's perspective of your "good" deeds.

therefore fundamentally opposition to God, rebellion against God, which roots in hatred of God.”⁴

Prior to your conversion you hated God. So did I. Don't flatter or deceive yourself by entertaining any thought to the contrary. You won't appreciate that you love him now if you don't realize you hated him then.

Evil in your behavior. We associate the word "evil" with the kind of atrocities that Saddam Hussein or Adolf Hitler might commit. Yet anything that challenges or rejects God's authority is evil. To sin means to defy or disobey the moral law of God. It can involve motive, attitude, or actions. From God's perspective, even our "best" behavior is to some degree evil.

The moment we commit a sin it enters the unalterable past. Our record is permanently flawed. And eventually that record will be reviewed by Almighty God.

"At one time or another," says R.C. Sproul, "we all have been struck by the sobering thought that one day each of us will stand in the presence of God to be judged. The fear

that arises from such a prospect stems from our awareness that based on our own merit we will never hear the verdict 'not guilty.'"⁵ Our past will accuse us for having directly assaulted—time after time after time—the authority of God. We will be without excuse. And merciful though he is, God in his justice will not overlook or ignore our rebellion. He will hold us responsible.

Are you so familiar with your status as a new creation that you've forgotten what you were apart from Christ? Do you realize what it means to be spared the wrath of God? Meditating on our sin and God's wrath won't lead to con-

demnation; rather, it will lead to an intense appreciation of what Jesus accomplished on the Cross. If you've never been struck by your own unworthiness, I doubt you sufficiently comprehend or appreciate the grace of God. I'd respectfully question whether you even know him at all.

“ Any infringement of the moral law amounts to a direct assault upon God. The moment we commit it, it becomes an integral part of the whole resistance movement, which, in affirming his Godhead, he is bound to take account of and to oppose.⁶

— Bruce Milne

Stuck in the Stone Age

God’s wrath is not a fashionable topic of conversation among this generation of upbeat baby boomers obsessed with their own self-improvement. I have yet to hear of Oprah Winfrey devoting airtime to the wrath of God. Our culture

doesn’t take it seriously. It’s seen as a primitive notion. What’s frightening, though, is the fact that the Church so often relates to the subject in a similar way. In numerous churches God’s wrath is never mentioned. Many theologians have dismissed it. Embarrassed by such stone-age concepts as hell and torment, we downplay and doubt their existence. The most common result is an over-emphasis on God’s love without a corresponding emphasis on his holiness and his wrath.

While falling all over ourselves trying to conceal this “embarrassing” feature of God’s character, we’ve sent this signal to our culture: God is infinitely understanding, sympathetic, patient, and sentimental. God is nice! God is a kind of cosmic Mr. Rogers, always ready to greet you with a warm smile and a pleasant word.

Because we have difficulty reconciling wrath with our perception of a loving God, the Church and this culture have sought to create God in their own image. But Scripture makes no apologies concerning the wrath of God. In fact, A.W. Pink notes that there are more references to God’s wrath in the Bible than to his love. We probably don’t have many of these passages underlined, but perhaps we should. We need to give serious study to the wrath of God.

Paul and other biblical writers had no inhibitions about expressing God’s wrath. Why? Because they knew that understanding the fix of justification begins with understanding the reality of God’s wrath. Unless you are aware of the certainty of wrath, you won’t

Meditate on Romans

11:22. Can you accept the fact that God has such contrasting traits? How does he demonstrate each of these characteristics?

3 Each of the Scripture references below describes a particular aspect of torment in hell. In the space next to each verse, name the condition each reveals.

Example:

- Job 18:17-19 Utter worthlessness
- Jude 13 _____
- Revelation 21: _____
- Luke 16:24 _____
- Matthew 22:13 _____
- Revelation 14:11 _____
- Daniel 12:2 _____

(Answers printed upside down at bottom of page 43.)

“ The most destructive myth of twentieth-century American religion is...that there is no wrath in God. Nothing promotes godlessness more than that myth.⁷ ”

— R.C. Sproul

For Further Study:

To see what the Bible says about hell, look up Matthew 3:12, 5:22, and 26:41, Mark 9:47-49, Luke 3:17, and 2 Peter 2:4.

understand the necessity of justification. Without wrath, mercy is meaningless. Without wrath, grace is unnecessary. Without wrath, you have no gospel. Without wrath, you'll never feel the need to be justified before Almighty God.

It's difficult to communicate effectively about God's wrath. Some people seem to enjoy describing the horrors that await unrepentant sinners. That's not God's attitude and it shouldn't be ours. Your local newspaper and the network news probably aren't going to investigate the subject of wrath—at least not in a biblical way—so let's examine what Scripture has to say on this topic.

When Sin and Holiness Collide

Jack Kevorkian was dubbed “Doctor Death” by the media for using a special device to assist people in suicide. I can't forget the time I saw a video clip of Kevorkian and two women made just before they took their lives. These ladies were unusually calm. As they spoke of their desire to end their lives, I felt grief and a sense of horror. They had no idea what lay beyond death. Unwilling to face the diseases that were afflicting their bodies, they unsuspectingly subjected their souls to the wrath of God.

God's wrath is real. It's terrifying. When his holiness and our sin collide, the inevitable result is wrath, which J.I. Packer defines as “God's resolute action in punishing sin.”

God is not indulgent, nor is he merely indignant over our sin. His wrath makes a Stephen King horror novel look like a nursery rhyme. The more you get to know him, the more your fear of him will increase. And that's

good. If this generation were to take a crash course in the fear of God, our shallow view of sin would immediately deepen.

The prophet Habakkuk says of God, “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you

cannot tolerate wrong” (Hab 1:13). In expressing God's pending judgment against Nineveh, Nahum prophesied,

“ It is partly because sin does not provoke our own wrath that we do not believe that sin provokes the wrath of God.⁸ ”

— R.W. Dale

Meditate on Exodus

20:18-20. Moses describes “the fear of God” as a good thing, but urges the people not to be afraid of God. Can you see the difference?

Meditate on Psalm

78:38-39. What should surprise us about God is not that he has wrath, but that he so often restrains himself from unleashing that wrath.

The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The Lord takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger and great in power; the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished...

Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him. The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him, but with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into darkness. (Na 1:2-3,6-8)

God’s wrath wasn’t limited to Nineveh. Though he demonstrates unbelievable patience and is “slow to anger,” our sins provoke his wrath as well. If we reject God’s goodness that has been offered through the person and finished work of Jesus Christ, we will one day experience his severity, and we will have no one to blame but ourselves.

God didn’t communicate his wrath just through a few minor prophets in some brief and obscure sections of the Old Testament. Paul writes in the first chapter of Romans, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (v.18). God’s wrath was a present reality in Paul’s day, and is in ours as well. You don’t have to wonder if America will one day be judged. America is *already* experiencing the wrath of God. When individuals call right wrong and wrong right, when immoral and idolatrous lifestyles become the norm, know that these are manifestations of wrath. One of the most effective and terrifying forms of judgment occurs when God ceases to intervene on our behalf. He simply withdraws and says in effect, “I will leave you to yourselves and allow you to experience the consequences of your rebellion.”

God doesn’t have to destroy us directly; all he has to do is remove his hand and we destroy ourselves.

God’s anger is not like the anger of man. He doesn’t have a bad temper. This isn’t some undisciplined basketball coach throwing a tantrum on the sidelines. God’s anger is just. It is neither arbitrary nor unpredictable. Rather, it is a premeditated and measured response to our godlessness and wickedness. Those things make God angry. And he will express it! Those who receive God’s

wrath deserve it! They have no one to blame but themselves.

You may be thinking to yourself, “That’s not my God you’re describing,” but this *is* the God revealed in the Bible. Though rarely discussed among Christians today, wrath and justice are very much a part of his character. His anger is fully appropriate, for if he were not angry at sin he would not be morally perfect. God’s wrath is as real as his love, and that fact places the unregenerated in a serious, desperate state.

Before closing this section, let me insert one final point. What was the primary purpose of the Cross? Just this: It was there that Jesus satisfied the fierce and holy wrath of Almighty God which we would otherwise have experienced. God’s accumulated and justified anger fell, in all its power and severity, not on us who deserved it, but on his Son. Jesus didn’t just save us from our sin—he saved us from God himself.

“We were by nature objects of wrath,” wrote Paul (Eph 2:3). God could and should have judged us for our rebellion against his rule. Instead he extended grace. At the Cross he found a way to reconcile his perfect justice and perfect mercy. The very One opposed to us while we were in our sin died in our place so that we, his enemies,

“ There is not only a wicked opposition of the sinner to God, but a holy opposition of God to the sinner.

— Charles Hodge

might be adopted into his family.

Jonathan Edwards was an instrumental force behind America’s first Great Awakening in the mid-eighteenth century. He is perhaps best known for a message he delivered titled “Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God.” According to eyewitness accounts, various members of Edwards’ congregation were so dramatically affected by the message that they clutched their seats, fell on their knees, and cried out in anguish at the prospect of their own damnation.

This was no stereotypical “fire and brimstone” tirade, however. From what I understand the listeners were not influenced by pulpit-banging or wild-eyed shouting, because there wasn’t any—Edwards read the message in a monotone. And while painting a clear picture of divine wrath, he placed primary emphasis on the gracious hands of God, for as Edwards was well aware, when we encounter the reality of wrath we gain fresh desire and appreciation for grace.

Answers: Jude 13 (abso-
lute darkness), Rev 21:8
(fire and burning), Lk
16:24 (this), Mt 22:13
(weeping/gnashing of
teeth), Rev 14:11 (sleep-
lessness), Da 12:2 (shame
and contempt).

God's wrath is real, terrifying, inevitable. But his nail-pierced hands are open and full of mercy. All who humble themselves in awe at the Cross will be spared the wrath to come.

Unfelt Needs

Not long ago a nationwide Gallup poll revealed that an increasing number of Americans consider themselves "born again." It's a bit premature to start celebrating, though, because the Church's impact on this culture is not keeping pace with the statistics. If the percentage of Americans calling themselves Christians were authentic disciples of Jesus Christ, our society would undergo radical reform.

Contributing to this problem is the fact that people are supposedly getting converted without an awareness of sin. Rather than confronting individuals with the reality of God's wrath, evangelism has degenerated into a sales job. Rather than clarifying the horror of man's sinful condi-

“ Our evangelical emphasis on the atonement is dangerous if we come to it too quickly. We learn to appreciate the access to God which Christ has won for us only after we have first seen God's inaccessibility to the sinner. We can cry 'hallelujah' with authenticity only after we have first cried 'woe is me, for I am lost.' ”⁹

— John Stott

tion and his desperate need for Christ, the gospel has been re-packaged as a slick set of benefits targeted to address specific "felt needs."

But leading people to conversion without first exposing them to the extent of their own sin and God's wrath is truly a terrible disservice. Countless converts come too quickly to the solution without fully

understanding the problem. They don't realize how they have violated God's perfect law and don't feel the justified wrath of God upon their lives. As a result, because they have not fathomed the amazing grace of Almighty God, they end up uncertain of his love.

You won't enjoy describing God's wrath to others, and they won't enjoy it either. Who likes to hear that he is a God-hating sinner? It's much easier to focus exclusively on the love of God. Yet the gospel is incomplete without an emphasis on wrath, for this is what puts God's love in perspective. We were alienated from him, enemies in our minds, characterized by evil behavior, and objects of wrath. He had every right to waste us without explanation

For Further Study:

Read the text of Peter's Pentecost message that resulted in 3,000 conversions (Ac 2:14-41). Notice verses 23, 36, and 40 in particular. Could Peter's style be considered "seeker sensitive"?

or apology. Instead, he gave up his only beloved Son to suffer judgment in our place. Apart from a revelation of wrath, we will never appreciate the absolute necessity of justification.

We must get back to a biblical presentation of and response to the gospel. We must make people aware of

“ In today’s world there is little emphasis on the biblical doctrine of sin. But a person with a shallow sense of sin and of the wrath of God against our sin will neither feel the need for nor understand the biblical doctrine of justification.¹⁰ ”

— Anthony Hoekema

their most significant and serious need, a need they probably don’t even feel: deliverance from the justified wrath of God. We must remind them (and remind ourselves) that though his anger is slow, it is certain. We must explain that, as the Bible makes so clear, “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the

hands of the living God” without having been justified by Jesus Christ (Heb 10:31).

As I read Jonathan Edwards’ message I find myself thinking, *No wonder there was a revival! No wonder the power of God accompanied this teaching. No wonder there was unprecedented conviction during that period of time.* Without minimizing the sovereign move of the Holy Spirit which made the Great Awakening so fruitful, I would submit that the content of the preaching had a great deal to do with it as well. When the Church again gives equal weight to wrath and mercy in its proclamation of the gospel, then individuals will be converted with a profound appreciation of grace. Rather than blend in with the culture they will stand out as radically different. They’ll be able to relate to it, but no longer will they reflect it. Instead, thanks to an authentic conversion, they will increasingly reflect the character of God.

Meditate on 2 Thessalonians 1:5-9. What stands out most to you in this vivid description of judgment?

Never Lose Touch

Theologian R.C. Sproul describes an interesting encounter he had with a zealous but tactless believer. The man suddenly confronted him one day as he was walking across a college campus.

“Are you saved?” the man demanded without even introducing himself. Sproul was startled and a bit offended by the man’s approach.

“Saved from what?” he shot back.

Now it was the would-be evangelist's turn to be startled. He became confused and was unable to give a specific response. He probably went away sensing a need for further Bible study...and a need to select his evangelistic targets more carefully.

"Saved" is a familiar word in our Christian vocabulary, but Sproul's question deserves a thoughtful response: From what have we been saved? By this point in the chapter you've probably anticipated the answer. We haven't been saved from low self-esteem. We have been saved "from the wrath to come" (1Th 1:10).

Our ignorance of wrath isn't purely coincidental. I believe we avoid the topic because it makes us feel frightened and condemned. There's truth to that—we should be frightened because we deserve to be condemned. But a

study of wrath leads to an understanding of grace and a release from condemnation. As much as we deserved eternal damnation, God saved us from his wrath and reconciled us to himself!

“ Divine love triumphed over divine wrath by divine self-sacrifice.¹¹

— John Stott ”

Rehearsing and reviewing your past won't drag you down into a pit of bleak introspection. Instead, it will lift your understanding of God and his mercy to new heights. You will comprehend the greatness of God's love in a dimension you never have before.

In his commentary on our Scripture passage from Colossians, Peter T. O'Brien says of the church at Colossae, "The gravity of their previous condition serves to magnify the wonder of God's mercy. The past is recalled not because the emphasis falls upon it, but to draw attention to God's mighty action...on the reader's behalf."¹² We don't recall the past in order to remain in it—we look back so that God's mighty action on our behalf through the justifying work of his Son can transform our lives in the dramatic way he intends. That was the case with Paul. He never lost touch with his past. In fact, look at the benefit he gained from a little retrospection:

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal,

Meditate on Psalm

103:1-18. Nothing provokes worship more than the realization that God "does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities."

immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1Ti 1:15-17)

Did looking back send Paul into a state of depression? No—it provoked a spontaneous outburst of worship for the wonder of God’s grace. “Once you were alienated from

“ The glory of the gospel is this: The one from whom we need to be saved is the one who has saved us.

— R.C. Sproul

God,” Paul wrote, “and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.” Then he uses one of the smallest yet most beautiful words in the Bible: “**But** now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body

through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (Co 1:21-22).

Rather than leaving us in our hopeless, helpless, desperate state, God reconciled us through Jesus so that we could stand in his presence without blemish and free from accusation—in a word, justified. We deserved eternal torment in hell. Instead he gave us eternal life through his Son.

Is that good news, or what? ■

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Did this chapter affect your self-esteem? Your self-image?
2. “Prior to your conversion you hated God,” says the author (Page 39). Do you agree or disagree?
3. Nineteenth-century atheist Colonel Robert Ingersoll once said, “The idea of hell was born of revenge and brutality on the one side, and cowardice on the other...I have no respect for any human being who believes in it...I dislike this doctrine, I hate it, I despise it, I defy this doctrine.” If given the chance, how would you answer Colonel Ingersoll?
4. According to the author, what’s the missing ingredient in contemporary evangelism? (Page 44)
5. Is it possible to fear God without being afraid of him? Explain your answer.
6. How does God’s anger differ from our anger?

7. On page 44 the author writes, “Countless converts come too quickly to the solution without fully understanding the problem.” What does he mean?
8. Why does God send sinners to hell when he could show mercy by forgiving them?
9. How can an awareness of God’s wrath deepen our sense of security in his love? Was that your experience in this chapter?

RECOMMENDED READING *Knowing God* by J.I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973)

The Atonement by Leon Morris (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984)

The Holiness of God by R.C. Sproul (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1985)

NOTES

1. Peter T. O’Brien, *Word Biblical Commentary—Colossians, Philemon* (Waco, TX: Word Publishing Co., 1982), p. 66.
2. Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1982), p. 154.
3. R.C. Lucas, *The Message of Colossians and Philemon* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), p. 61.
4. Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1989), p.47
5. From a tape by R.C. Sproul titled “Saved from the Wrath to Come” (Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 1991).
6. Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, p. 154.
7. From a tape by R.C. Sproul titled “The Innocent Native in Africa,” from the series *Objections Answered* (Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier Ministries).
8. John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 109.
9. Ibid.
10. Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 153.
11. John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 159.
12. Peter T. O’Brien, *Word Commentary—Colossians, Philemon*, p. 66.