

The Wrath of God

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One of the evidences of decay and departure in the professing Church is the large-scale rejection of the teaching of the Scriptures on the wrath of God. Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his recently-issued Exposition of Romans draws attention to this and shows that it is not only among Modernists and Ritualists that this attitude prevails; it is evident too among some who are evangelicals by repute.

Dr C. H. Dodd, for some 14 years professor of Divinity at Cambridge and chairman of the panel of translators of the New English Bible [New Testament section], deals in his Commentary on Romans with the phrase 'the wrath of God' in Romans 1.18. He speaks of it as 'an archaic phrase' which 'suits a thoroughly archaic idea'. In other words, he looks on the idea of God's wrath as out-of-date, antiquated. Early in 1931 there was a dialogue in the pulpit of Elmwood Presbyterian Church, Belfast, two prominent ministers Drs Frazer-Hurst and Hyndman taking part. The former quoted from a Catechism he was taught in his boyhood. The question was: 'What are you by nature?' and the answer: 'I am an enemy of God, a child of Satan and an heir of hell'. Dr Frazer-Hurst described such teaching as monstrous and Dr Hyndman supported him by saying:

'These ideas belong to the mentality and outlook of bygone ages.' It would seem as if these men believed that we come into the world as little cherubs sprouting wings.

To adopt such views one would have to repudiate a large part of Scripture from Genesis through to Revelation. In Genesis 3 we find Adam and Eve thrust out of the garden for their sin and a flaming sword set to keep them from the tree of life. Not only were they affected, but the sentence of condemnation fell upon the race [Romans 5.12, 18, 19]. In Genesis 6 we find God saying: 'I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth' — and the deluge ensued. Then in Genesis 19 we have the destruction of the cities of the plain by fire and brimstone from heaven.

I might go on citing countless examples of the manifestation of divine wrath right through the Bible. Dr Leon Morris says of the Old Testament in his *The Apostolic*

Preaching of the Cross: 'There are more than 20 words used to express the wrath conception as it applies to Jehovah' and 'these are used so frequently that there are over 580 occurrences to be taken into consideration' [p 131]. He adds that this conception 'cannot be eradicated from the Old Testament without irreparable loss' [p 156]. So the Old Testament is full of the concept of the wrath of God.

In his Commentary on Romans Dr Dodd says that the wrath of God 'does not appear in the teaching of Jesus'. One is reminded of John Newton's reply to Dr Taylor of Norwich when the latter said: 'I have collated every word in the Hebrew Scriptures 17 times, and it is very strange if the doctrine of the atonement you hold should not have been found by me.' Newton's reply was: 'I am not surprised at this; I once went to light my candle with the extinguisher on it.' He meant that prejudices from education, learning, etc., often form an extinguisher which must be removed and which only God can remove.

Dr Dodd speaks of the thought of anger as an attitude of God to men as disappearing and adds: 'His love and mercy become all-embracing'. This really smacks of universalism. One suspects that universalistic presuppositions are really in many cases responsible for the rejection of the concept of the wrath of God.

Jesus spoke of the rich man in the torments of hell and He warned again and again of 'the weeping and the gnashing of teeth' and of hell fire and the unquenchable fire and the undying worm and the outer darkness. Describing how He would act as King at His coming one day to sit on the throne of His glory He pictures Himself as saying: 'Depart from me, ye cursed, into the everlasting fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels.' Surely the extinguisher is functioning when Dr Dodd claims that the idea of the wrath of God is absent from the teaching of Jesus.

Nor is the wrath of God absent from the teaching of the apostle Paul. He pictured that wrath as like a dark cloud overhanging a guilty world and he proclaimed Jesus as the only deliverer from this coming wrath [I Thess. 1.10]. He also describes this wrath as evident in the heathen world of his day — evident in God's giving them up in the lusts of their hearts to uncleanness and vile passions and a reprobate mind [Romans 1.24, 26, 28]. And in Romans chapter 2 he warns of 'wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God'. These are but a few of the citations which might be given from Paul's teaching.

We have the same testimony from John, the apostle of love. What a tremendous picture he gives of Christ coming as King of kings and Lord of lords 'treading the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of God the Almighty' [Rev. 19.15! How can anyone that has read Jonathan Edwards' comment on this verse ever forget it? 'The words', he says, 'are exceeding terrible. If it had only been said 'the wrath of God', the words would have implied that which is infinitely dreadful: but it

is 'the fierceness and wrath of God'. The fury of God! the fierceness of Jehovah! O how dreadful must that be! Who can utter or conceive what such expressions carry in them? But it is also 'the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God' — as though there would be a very great manifestation of His almighty power in what the fierceness of His wrath would inflict, as though omnipotence should as it were be enraged and exerted as men are wont to exert their strength in the fierceness of their wrath.'

Many more Scriptures could be appealed to, but sufficient evidence has been produced to show that the witness to the idea of the wrath of God is pervasive in the Scriptures.

When the doctrine of the wrath of God is denied, other great truths are affected by this denial. First among these is the historic doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures.

I. THE INSPIRATION OF THE SCRIPTURES

Anyone who denies the wrath of God strikes a blow at divine revelation — for, as we have seen, God's wrath is plainly revealed in His Word. His holy indignation against sin is one of the great 'burdens' of Scripture, one of the Bible's great oracles; and he who denies this holy indignation is flouting the verdict of the Judge of all the earth, a verdict repeated times without number in His Word. Professor T. J. Crawford was right when he said: 'A great part of the Bible would need to be written over again before we can expunge from it the broad and palpable evidence of God's holy displeasure against sinful men and of His righteous purpose to inflict judgment for their iniquities.' The effect then of the denial of the divine wrath then would be devastating in its effect upon the doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures.

II. THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

If we preach the wrath of God, we are sometimes accused of representing God as a Being of fitful passion and vindictive fury. In other words, we are accused of blackening the character of God. But we plead 'Not guilty'. The God of the Bible is not subject to sudden and irrational fits of anger. His wrath is His settled indignation against sin. Dr Leon Morris rightly speaks of it as 'a burning zeal for the right coupled with a perfect hatred for everything that is evil'.

When men reject the idea of the wrath of God, it is evident that they really do not believe in the perfect holiness of God, for that holiness involves a settled and burning indignation against sin. Moses could say of the adversaries of Israel: 'their rock is not as our Rock' and we can say the same of men who reject the divine wrath. Their god is a flabby sort of being, not the God who is holy in all His

ways and righteous in all His works.

III. THE DOCTRINE OF SIN

There is a close connection between the denial of God's wrath and a light view of sin, as Dr J. G. Machen said: 'The modern rejection of God's wrath proceeds from a light view of sin which is totally at variance with the teaching of the whole New Testament and of Jesus Himself'. It is the sight of the infinite holiness of God which leads a man to a true sense of his sin and depravity. When Isaiah viewed God as sitting on a throne high and lifted up, and worshipped as the perfectly Holy One by the seraphim, then he cried 'Woe is me, for I am undone'. When men see God's righteousness and His wrath, it is then that they become earnest seekers after grace.

Once when Whitefield was preaching at Norwich, a thoughtless youth was led by a gipsy's forecast of his future to go and hear the great preacher. The sermon was based on John the Baptist's appeal to the Sadducees to flee from the wrath to come. As he preached Whitefield burst into a flood of tears and then cried with all his might: 'O my hearers, the wrath *is to come*, the wrath *is to come*'. The words sank into the young man's heart; they followed him for days and weeks and he could think of little else but 'the wrath to come'. He later became, as Andrew Fuller tells us, 'a considerable preacher'. Such conviction of sin followed by genuine conversion is not likely to occur where the note of divine wrath is muted; sin is no longer regarded as 'the abominable thing which God hates'.

IV. THE DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT

In his commentary on Romans chapter 1, Dr Dodd denies divine wrath. It is small wonder that he proceeds in his commentary on chapter 3, verse 25-26, to repudiate the idea of 'the propitiation of the wrath of God' and of 'the satisfaction demanded by His justice and afforded by Christ's vicarious endurance of the penalty of sin.' Small wonder too that the word 'propitiation' was removed from the New English Bible as well as from the Revised Standard Version. One of the RSV translators, Dr C. T. Craig of Oberlin School of Theology, commenting on the omission of the word 'propitiation', said: 'Any attempt to show that there was something in the essential nature of God that demanded satisfaction for sin ends only in blackening the character of God.' So the doctrine of the atonement must go in the interests of the Modernist view of a flabby deity!

Dr Dodd admits that in classical Greek and in the Koiné [or Hellenistic Greek] the word 'propitiate' has the idea of placating or appeasing wrath. But he seeks to argue from the Septuagint [the Greek translation of the New Testament made a few centuries before Christ] that a change had taken place in the meaning of the word. Dr Roger Nicole of Gordon Divinity School has produced 21 arguments

against Dr Dodd's line of reasoning [see the *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. XVII, No. 2]. Dr Nicole's article is simply devastating in its force; he seems to have shot Dr Dodd down entirely.

Dr Leon Morris in his *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* says that Dr Dodd 'totally ignores the fact that in many passages there is explicit mention of the putting away of God's anger, and accordingly his conclusions cannot be accepted without serious modification.' Indeed, Dr Morris produces arguments to show that 'it is manifestly impossible to maintain that the verb [propitiate] has been emptied of its force.'

One must be supremely thankful for the labours of these two fine scholars of a younger generation for their labours in putting up such a capable defence of, and devastating argument for, the historic Christian doctrine of the atonement as a propitiation of divine wrath and a satisfaction to divine justice.

V. THE DOCTRINE OF THE LOVE OF GOD

Those who reject the wrath of God often plead that their rejection is in the interests of the love of God; but actually their rejection of divine wrath inflicts a grievous wound on the doctrine which they profess ardently to espouse. This is so because Christ's propitiatory sacrifice to satisfy divine justice and propitiate God's wrath is the greatest exhibition of divine love. We read in Scripture: 'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins' [1 John 4.10].

Dr James Denney said: 'If the propitiatory death of Jesus is eliminated from the love of God, it might be unfair to say that the love of God is robbed of all meaning, but it is certainly robbed of its apostolic meaning' [Denney's *Death of Christ*, p 152]. And this is the meaning that supremely matters.

VI. THE DOCTRINE OF THE JUDGMENT

If there is no wrath of God, then the tremendous terrors of the judgment are eliminated. Then that ancient hymn loses its significance which says:

***That day of wrath, that dreadful day
When heaven and earth shall pass away!
What power shall be the sinner's stay?
How shall he meet that dreadful day?***

Take away the concept of the wrath of God and we strip the great day of assize of much of its tremendous awe.

VII. THE DOCTRINE OF HELL

In 1930 there was a book issued with the title *What is Hell?* There were twelve contributors. Among them were two novelists, a Spiritist, a Theosophist, a pagan, a Roman Catholic, a Congregationalist who became a Roman Catholic two years later, an Anglican bishop and an Anglican dean. The dean, Dr W. R. Inge, though not thoroughly orthodox, could be quite caustic and penetrating in his comments on the Modernists and he had many true words to say about hell. Indeed, he was the one in this volume who came closest to the Scripture doctrine. He said that 'heaven and hell stand and fall, together' and pointed out that our Lord spoke in perfectly plain language about its duration. He added: 'Modernist Protestantism, though it may be reluctant to admit it, believes in Purgatory, but not in hell.' When Dr Inge ceased to be dean of St. Paul's in 1934, his successor was Dr W. R. Matthews and it is interesting to note that he says in his book *The Hope of Immortality* that to him *purgatory* 'has great attractions'; he also says that he believes it 'right to pray for the dead' and it would seem that universalism also has 'attractions' for him. So it again appears, as we have already noted, that many of the objectors to the concept of God's wrath are really universalistic in their outlook. A distinguished theologian of the Presbyterian Church, U.S., who is a member of his Church's Permanent Theological Committee stated in a church paper: 'God does not have two different purposes for men — that is, punishment for some and reward for others — but only one'. This is just brazen universalism.

In conclusion, I would point out that when men deny the wrath of God, they are cutting one of the vital nerves of evangelism. It was the thought of the wrath of God, as well as His love, that lent such earnestness to the pleadings of the preachers of the gospel. The thought of the overhanging cloud of God's wrath lent earnestness to the preaching of Paul. Knowing the fear of the Lord, he persuaded men. It was the same with Whitefield and Brownlow North and R. M. M'Cheyne and Henry Martyn. Of North his biographer wrote: 'The immortality of the human soul and its endless existence in a state of holiness and blessedness, or of corruption and misery, were subjects constantly on his lips.' Listen to M'Cheyne also as he says: 'As I walked in the fields, the thought came over me with almost overwhelming power, that every one of my flock must soon be in heaven or hell. O how I wished I had a tongue like thunder, that I might make all hear; or that I had a frame like iron, that I might visit every one and say, 'Escape for thy life'. Ah, sinners! you little know how I fear that you will lay the blame of your damnation at my door.' And it was he who said that the preacher should never speak of everlasting punishment without tears.

What gratitude should surge in our hearts because God has not appointed *us* unto wrath but to the obtaining of salvation through our Lord Jesus! R. M. M'Cheyne stressed this too when he wrote:

***Chosen not for good in me,
Wakened up from wrath to flee,
Hidden in the Saviour's side,
By the Spirit sanctified,
Teach me, Lord, on earth to show,
By my love how much I owe.***

By nature we were once 'children of wrath' — exposed to the dread wrath of God [Eph 2.3]. But we have been saved by grace through faith, that we might do the good works which God has before ordained for us [Eph 2.8, 10]. We are under a tremendous obligation. This was how Paul saw himself. He said: 'I am *debtor* both to Greeks and barbarians . . . So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you also . . . *for* I am not ashamed of the gospel: for it is the power of God unto salvation . . . : *for* therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith unto faith . . . *for* the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men' [Rom 1.14-18]. Note the four 'for's', especially the last one — '*for* the wrath of God is revealed from heaven'. The divine wrath was revealed in God's judgments on the heathen world of that day and it overhung that world like a dark cloud. That same wrath is evident in the world of our day and overhangs it like a dark cloud. We too should have the tremendous sense of obligation which Paul had. We too are debtors — debtors to men of every race and condition. May the spirit of concern fill our hearts as it filled the heart of the apostle — that we may give an account of our stewardship one day with joy and not with grief. Amen.

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