

CONTENTS

Introduction	9
<i>1</i> Wrath	11
<i>2</i> Propitiation	23
<i>3</i> Justification	35
<i>4</i> Rejoicing	47
<i>5</i> Grace	59
<i>6</i> Union	71
<i>7</i> Nature	83
<i>8</i> Heirs	95
<i>9</i> Weakness	107

<i>10</i> Church	119
<i>11</i> Light	131
<i>12</i> Battle	143
<i>13</i> Profit	157
<i>14</i> Peace	171
<i>15</i> Death	185
<i>16</i> Intercession	197
<i>17</i> Works	209
<i>18</i> Fellowship	221
<i>19</i> Lamb	233
<i>20</i> City	245
Reading the Bible in One Year	258

1 Wrath

ROMANS 1



DISCOVER

why God's wrath is an aspect of His love.



LEARN

how Jesus absorbed the wrath of God for us.



WORSHIP

because there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

I HAVE been fascinated by a recent advertisement that asks, “What do you want the Internet to be?” The point of the ad is that the Internet can be used to support almost any purpose. You can use the Internet to sell things, to gather information, or as an opportunity for meeting people with similar interests. The Internet is whatever you want it to be. The only limitations are the limits of human ingenuity.

Many people think about God in the same way as they think about the Internet. They assume that, like the Internet, God is essentially a product of human ingenuity and that writings about Him have been developed by man and for man, to meet his spiritual need.

It would, of course, follow that old ideas about God would be as useless and as laughable as technology that is fifty years out of date. The Bible would be a book of mere historical interest, which may contain some useful insights but would have no more authority for us today than the writings of Plato or Alexander the Great.

If all religions were of human origin, it would also follow that no religion could claim that its teaching about God is “the truth” or that the teaching of another religion about God is false.

These assumptions have penetrated deep into our culture, with the result that for many people the fundamental question is no longer, “Who is God?” but, “What do you want God to be?”

Of course, there is something very attractive about this, because if each of us can choose what we want God to be, then we can decide that God will be in favor of everything we pursue and against everything we oppose. Such a god would be like a large-screen projection of ourselves—god created by us and in our own image.

As we have followed the Bible story, we have discovered that there is one fundamental problem with this whole approach: God Himself!

THE GOD YOU CANNOT ALTER

The Bible story is all about the living God revealing Himself to us. The God of the Bible did not arise from the religious thoughts of Moses, Isaiah, and the other prophets. These men simply recorded the revelation that was given to them.

God broke into their lives, speaking directly to them in order to make Himself known. God revealed Himself to them so that, through the Scriptures, we may come to know Him.

When God introduces Himself to us in the Bible, He says, “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14). This is the first thing we need to know about God. He is not whoever we want Him to be: He is who He is. We cannot alter God.

I love the story of the woman who was extremely nervous about her wedding. She came to the rehearsal in a terrible state, worrying about where she should stand and the order in which things would happen.

The pastor tried to calm her fears and said to her, “Look, you don’t need to worry because it’s very simple. You walk down the aisle, you come up to the altar, and then we sing a hymn. It’s very easy. Down the aisle, up to the altar, sing the hymn. Got it?”

“Yes,” she said, “I think I can remember that.”

The following day, when the music for her entrance to the church began, she looked straight at her future husband and as she started her procession was heard to say, “aisle, altar, hymn, aisle, altar, hymn. . . I’ll alter him.”

Some folks have married with that idea and it is usually the road to disaster, because while you may be able to make the Internet whatever you want it to be, you cannot make a person whatever you want him (or her) to be. Sooner or later that person will say, “Either accept me for who I am, or leave me alone, but I cannot be whatever you want.”

If that is true of us, it is certainly true of God. We can't alter Him. It matters very little what we want God to be. The important thing is that we discover who He is.

THE GOD WHO LOVES YOU

In our journey through the Bible story, we have discovered repeatedly that God is love. That means that God is absolutely committed to seek the good of all that He has made.

The Bible also tells us that God is holy. This means that God is absolutely opposed to anything that would destroy the objects of His love. God's holiness is a dimension of His love. You cannot love a person without, at the same time, hating that which would destroy him or her.

I will never forget being with a family who was caring for a son dying of cancer. One evening, the boy's mother said to me, "I hate this cancer." She said it with some venom, and understandably so. It was destroying her son, and she hated what was destroying the object of her love.

I think of another lady whose husband is an alcoholic. Over the years, alcohol has destroyed his life, and progressively it has destroyed every area of their marriage. She has remained loyal to him at great personal cost. One day she said to me, "I love him, but I hate what he has become." Her hatred of what destroyed her husband and of what he has become is a component of her love. Indeed, the day she stops hating what he has become would be the day she stops loving him.

Love and hate are often found together as natural partners in the Bible. "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil" (Romans 12:9). These are two sides of the same coin. If we do not hate what is evil, then there is no sincerity in our claim to love. The opposite of love is not hatred but indifference. True love hates all that destroys the one who is loved.

THE GOD WHO HATES WHATEVER DESTROYS YOU

God loves the world, and that means that He hates all that destroys the world. He is absolutely opposed to anything that would destroy the objects of His love. He hates what sin has done to us precisely because He loves us.

This is why God cannot and will not leave the world as it is. To do so would be a denial of love. God loves the world—that is why He relentlessly opposes all evil. God hates evil; He cannot be indifferent to it.

THE GOD WHO IS NEVER FRUSTRATED

God's relentless opposition to evil is good news, provided that He is able to overcome its destructive power. So we can be thankful that God is sovereign. This means that He is absolutely in control of all things. God is in a class of His own. There is no fact that He does not know, no place where He is not present, no task that He cannot accomplish, and no permission that He needs to seek.

The problem for the lady whose husband is an alcoholic is that she does not have the power to overcome what is destroying him. Her love is therefore frustrated. She has tried everything she can to separate the person she loves from the thing that is destroying him, but she can't do it. God is able to do all things. He is able to recover the people He loves from the people we have become. His love will not be frustrated.

God is absolutely committed to seek the good of the objects of His love. He is resolutely opposed to anything that would destroy those who are the objects of His love. He is completely in control of all things. God says, "I am who I am." He is love, He is holy, and He is sovereign.

This is not what some people would like God to be, but it is who He is, whether we like it or not. And we should be truly thankful. A god who did not love us would offer us no hope. A god who was not resolutely opposed to evil would be irrelevant, and a god who could not destroy evil would be useless in a world that suffers under the curse of its power.

WHAT MAKES GOD ANGRY?

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness. (ROMANS 1:18)

This wrath of God is not some kind of flaring rage, and we should not think of God losing control and lashing out in random acts of frustration. God's wrath is "a holy response to the unholy, a just reaction to the unjust, a pure rejection of the impure," wrote Stuart Briscoe.¹ God's wrath is His strong and settled opposition to all that is evil.

It is not in God's nature to be angry. God is love: That is His nature, and there has never been and never will be a time when He is not love. But God's anger is different. The Bible never says that God is wrath. In fact, God is slow to anger (Psalm 103:8). The Bible story demonstrates His great patience and tolerance

toward an evil world. But God can be provoked to anger, and Paul tells us that His anger is provoked by godlessness and wickedness.

A godless person is one who doesn't want anything to do with God. A wicked person is one who refuses to obey God. The godless and wicked person is someone who says to God, "I don't want to know You and I will not obey You."

In order to sustain this response to God, a person must "suppress the truth" that God has revealed about Himself. Picture a man pressing down on a powerful spring. He has to put his whole weight on it to keep the spring compressed. It takes sustained energy to do that. If the man lets up for a moment, the spring will recoil.

That is the picture Paul uses. It takes energy to go on resisting God. Those who want nothing to do with God have to work hard at avoiding Him because His revelation is all around us. God has made His divine power and His glory known in the splendors of creation (Romans 1:20).

A person who does not want to know God has to close his eyes to this revelation and keep up the pretense of believing that the beauties and order of the world are products of random chance. Many people choose to believe this today because they find the alternative unacceptable. They are determined not to acknowledge the glory of their Creator because they have decided that they will not obey Him.

The reason many people do not know the God of the Bible is not that He has failed to make Himself known, but that in our godlessness and wickedness, we have chosen not to know Him.

When people respond to God by saying, "We don't want to know You, we will not obey You, and we are going to pour our energy into patterns of belief and behavior that will keep Your truth as far from us as possible," God reveals His wrath. He cannot be indifferent to godlessness and wickedness. God loves the world; He cannot shrug as His world destroys itself.

THE GOD WHO LETS PEOPLE GO

God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts. (ROMANS 1:24)

God gave them over to shameful lusts. (v. 26)

He [God] gave them over to a depraved mind. (v. 28)

The words "wrath of God" may cause some people to think about God targeting

wicked people with fork lightning or causing volcanoes to erupt over rebellious communities, but that is not what Paul tells us in Romans 1. Sometimes we may wish that God would make a direct strike on the perpetrators of torture and mass murder. One day He will, but that is rarely how God's wrath operates in the world today.

Where an individual or a society says, "We do not want God and we will not obey God," God expresses His wrath by allowing their choice. God "[gives] them over" (v. 24). He stands back from those who do not want Him and will not obey Him and allows them to live with the full reality of their own choice.

That is precisely what happened in the Garden of Eden. God surrounded our first parents with good gifts, but they wanted to take the place of God themselves and chose not to obey Him. The first sin in the garden was an expression of godlessness and wickedness. Our first parents suppressed the truth, they chose the knowledge of evil, and God gave them over to it.

When I first presented this message to my congregation, I brought a crystal vase into the pulpit, held it high, and asked the congregation what would happen if I gave it up. (Someone rightly answered, "You'll get into trouble when you get home!")

If I "gave up" the vase, it would become subject to the pull of gravity. The vase would have no way of overcoming the powers that surround it. It would fall like a stone, and it would shatter.

That is exactly what happens when God "gives up" the godless and the wicked. When the godless say, "We do not want You," and the wicked say, "We will not obey You," God gives them up to their choice.

When God gives people up, society goes into a kind of moral free-fall.

When God gives them up, the godless and the wicked find themselves at the mercy of powers that are greater than themselves. Paul identified these powers as "sinful desires," "shameful lusts," and "a depraved mind."

If the evidence of God's wrath being revealed in our society is that people who do not want God and will not obey God find themselves in the grip of sinful desires, shameful lusts, and a depraved mind, I cannot avoid the conclusion that the wrath of God is clearly being revealed in our nation today.

If resistance to God and His commandments increases in our society, we will find ourselves increasingly overwhelmed by evils that arise from sinful desires, shameful lusts, and depraved minds. When God gives people up, society goes into a kind of moral free-fall to its own destruction. That is precisely what happened to the

Roman Empire. It is the consistent pattern of God's judgment throughout history.

It may be that even as you read, you can see how sinful desires, shameful lusts, and a depraved mind are pulling you down. God has given you over to what you have chosen. Your only hope is that He may have mercy and save you. That opportunity is open to you today, but if you persist in the attitude that says to God, "I do not want You and I will not obey You," the powers that hold you will lead to your destruction.

STORING UP WRATH

Do you show contempt for the riches of his [God's] kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. (ROMANS 2:4-5)

God's wrath is already being revealed, but only in part. History is riddled with evils that have never been brought to justice and lies that were never brought to light. Some perpetrators of evil seem to prosper through their crimes, and we wonder why God allows it to be so.

Paul says that people who refuse to turn to God in repentance are "storing up wrath." There are many things that we may choose to store up, but wrath is not one of them. God shows great patience, kindness, and tolerance toward us. He does not treat us as our sins deserve. As we saw, He is slow to anger.

The purpose of His patience and kindness is to give us the opportunity of coming to Him in repentance. This would mean changing our whole disposition toward God, and then seeking to know Him and obey Him. Those who refuse that invitation are storing up wrath against themselves for the day of God's wrath when His righteous judgment will be revealed.

There will be a day when God's full hostility toward all that destroys the objects of His love will be revealed. When that day comes, the godless and the wicked will call on the rocks to fall on them (Revelation 6:16). They would rather be buried alive than face almighty God, but they will not be able to avoid Him.

God will destroy all that destroys us, and if we remain in what destroys us, then by definition we will be destroyed as well. The only hope is that there should

somehow be a separation between me and the sin that would otherwise destroy me.

We have seen that God's wrath is being revealed in part today, and that it is being stored up for the day when His righteous judgment will be revealed toward those who refuse to repent. But the Bible speaks about a third occasion when the wrath of God was revealed.


GOD'S WRATH AT THE CROSS

God displayed [Jesus] publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. (ROMANS 3:25 NASB)

God presented Jesus as the one on whom His wrath was poured out. That's what the word "propitiation" means. God's relentless opposition to all that destroys us was poured out on the Lord Jesus Christ when He died on the cross.

Some people might question if this was really necessary. That was precisely the question Jesus raised in the agony of His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me" (Matthew 26:39). Jesus was saying, "If there is any other way for men and women to be saved besides Your wrath being poured out on Me, then let's not go down this road. But if this is the only way, then let Your will be done."

And so it was. "He . . . did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all" (Romans 8:32). Notice the phrase: God "gave him up"! God took His hand off His Son. He let Christ fall. He dropped Him into hell for you. That's why Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).



[God] held Jesus accountable for all that destroys us.

Jesus had lived a perfect life. He was the very opposite of the godless and the wicked. The reason the wrath of God was poured out on Jesus was that "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21). God found a way of separating us from our sin. He separated the sins He hates from the people He loves by laying these sins on Jesus. Then He held Jesus accountable for all that destroys us. God laid our iniquity on Him, and He endured our punishment.

I did drop the glass vase in church that Sunday morning, and it fell as it was overwhelmed by the force of gravity. It caused a few gasps of surprise! But the vase was not destroyed, because having dropped it from my right hand, I caught it a few feet from the ground with my left. I gave the crystal vase up to the power of gravity that would lead to its destruction, but I delivered it from that power by holding it up.

That's what God does in Jesus Christ. He offers to save those who otherwise would fall to their destruction. Jesus Christ went to the lowest point so that He could lift you up. You are not like an inanimate crystal vase. You can call out to God, even as you are conscious of the power of sinful desires, shameful lusts, and a depraved mind over you. You can ask Him to save you.

You do not have the power to separate yourself from either the guilt or the power of your sin, but Jesus Christ is able to make that separation for you. That is why He went to the cross. It is through His blood that those who come to Him are brought into a right relationship with God, and it is in this way that we are saved from God's wrath (Romans 5:9).

"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Our sin has been condemned in Him, and dealt with at the cross. The object of the Father's love became the object of His wrath because the objects of His wrath were also the objects of His love. The storm of God's wrath broke on Jesus, and when it was over, the way was opened for the godless and the wicked to return to God and be delivered from His wrath.

God's wrath is the response of His holiness and His love to evil. It is not in God's nature to be angry, but His anger is provoked by the godlessness and wickedness of men and women who suppress the truth that God has clearly revealed. God expresses His wrath by giving people up to their own choice with the result that they become bound by the power of sinful desires, shameful lusts, and a depraved mind.

But God has sent His Son to deliver us from His wrath. When Christ died at Calvary, He endured the wrath of God for us. That is why He is able to save all who will come to Him from the wrath of God.

Almighty Father,

I bow before You in worship, grateful that You have the power and the will to destroy sin and evil forever. Thank You that You have not abandoned the world, and that You have sent Your Son, Jesus Christ, to deliver me from Your wrath. Thank You for all that He endured for me, on the cross.

Help me to take in this awesome demonstration of Your love. Fill my heart with love for You and keep me from wickedness. Hasten the day when sin will be no more, through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

Note

1. Stuart Briscoe, *Romans*, vol. 1 of *The Communicator's Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1982), 40.