

## ***Back to wrath again, sorry***

I was talking this week with a vicar who, like me, has a heart for evangelism. I shared a little of my recent journey and my desire to find a way to put across the good news in a culturally appropriate way, but he insisted that an appreciation of sin and the wrath of God is absolutely fundamental to the ‘good news’. And he warned me against cherry-picking scriptures and thereby not putting across the full truth of what the Bible teaches. Fair enough.

My own gospel teaser (#livingmybestlife), which I put on all my emails, starts from what I think people can relate to – relationship breakdown – and isn’t that the essence of what sin is? But maybe I am dumbing down the gospel to make it more acceptable to my friends and family – which is what, in the nicest possible way, another friend accused me of last year. So what does the Bible teach about God’s wrath?

Over the past months I have tried to squarely face some of the Old Testament ‘wrath of God’ by using the principle of trying to interpret the Scriptures as Jesus did. So where is the wrath of God (the Father) in the life and teaching of Jesus? Here are some notes I made in my search:

- Matthew 3 (+ parallel in Mk & Lk) ““You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” directed at the Scribes and Pharisees
- Matthew 18 (+ parallel in Mk & Lk) – Jesus has severe warnings (not ‘wrath’, but ‘woe!’ – similar) for “If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin” and “...things that cause people to sin ... woe to the man through whom they come!” and God’s anger is shown as “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”
- Matthew 23 (whole chapter!) (+ Mk & Lk) “whitewashed tombs” etc. Scribes and Pharisees
- Mark 3 – anger against those who said it was against God’s law to heal on the Sabbath
- Mark 11 (+ Mt, Lk, Jn) – cleansing the temple – anger for those who pervert the worship of God
- Jn 3:36 “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”

That last one looks a bit more like what my vicar friend wanted me to talk about with non-Christians, but that wrath is the result of rejecting Jesus, not of ‘sinning’ (= doing bad thngs).

So I don’t have any problem at all with any wrath that Jesus expresses, but what about the rest of the New Testament?

My ‘wrath’ search went straight from John to Romans 1:18. My NIV heads that passage: “God’s Wrath against Mankind”. Ah yes, isn’t this the bit about God’s wrath against people involved in ‘sexual impurity’, ‘shameful lusts’ and ‘wickedness, greed, depravity ... envy, murder, strife’?!

Hang on, let’s be a little careful. There’s only one reference to ‘wrath’ in Romans 1: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who

*suppress the truth* by their wickedness.” This is sounding a little more like what Jesus kept saying, that the wrath of God is revealed against those who cause others to stumble.

Immediately following Romans 1 is Romans 2(!); what’s more, it starts with a ‘therefore’, so it must be read **with** Romans 1, and chapter 2 has *three* ‘wrath’s and one ‘anger’ in the first eight verses! But look at v.1: “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else.” Who is the ‘you’? Well, I guess it’s the Roman Christians.

But I think they have been *set up* by the wily Paul! He’s used chapter 1 to tempt them into saying, “Yes, yes, Paul, you’re absolutely right! Look at all those terrible things that ‘they’ do!” And then he clobbers them with his “therefore” – God’s *wrath and anger is directed at Christians*: “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.” Ouch!

I have come to the conclusion that the main thrust of Romans 1-3 is **not** that “mankind is intrinsically evil and is therefore under God’s wrath”, despite the NIV’s heading, “God’s Wrath against Mankind”.

Rather, I think it’s more like: Yes, we all know there’s a lot of evil in the world, and God knows too, and he won’t let the evil go unpunished. **But** God (a.k.a. Jesus) is very, **very** angry when **you**, as a Christian, are self-righteous and, by misappropriating the truth, turn other people away from God.

But am I cherry-picking? What about the rest of the New Testament? Apart from Revelation, all the remaining ‘wrath’ is in Paul’s epistles. I haven’t studied those references in detail, but after my experience in his first epistle, I’m very wary of insisting that God’s wrath is an essential element in any presentation of the gospel. (And my work on understanding Paul’s teaching in Romans 1-3 is ongoing; once again Brad Jersak’s ‘A more Christ-like God’ is proving really helpful.)

What about repentance? I think it’s the same story as in Romans 1-2: it was mainly Israel that was called to repent – i.e. those who already believed in God, but had got a distorted view of what God is really like. Yes, of course, everyone needs to ‘re-think’ (= repent), but God’s anger is against me if I’m actively turning people (e.g. my own family) away from God by portraying him as a God who is angry when they ‘do wrong things’.

Well, what about fire and brimstone? Is that biblical? Sweeping statement, but no, I can’t see that in the Scriptures either, well, not against people who do wrong things.

I’m moving (nay, I have moved) to a very different view of what the gospel actually is... but more of that anon.

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