

312 Love and wrath?

I was never one to accept the parental, ‘Because I say so’: I wanted to know ‘Why?!’ From an early age, I would take things apart to find out how they worked. So I guess it’s part of my nature, and that’s what has driven my seven-year search: How does God ‘work’?

In my life, I’ve had success at some things, as a result of applying a literal, logical, mechanical approach, but if I were to try to apply that literal, logical, mechanical approach (LLM) to my relationship with Sue, I doubt it would work too well, and I have now come to believe that my LLM approach to God is also not over-helpful.

But that LLM approach fits well with the view I subscribed to for almost 50 years: I have sinned, I deserve God’s punishment, but God loves us, and so he allowed Jesus to be punished in our place; we then can be declared ‘Not guilty’ and can live in freedom: ‘On the cross when Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied.’ It may be LLM, but I no longer find that view helpful in my relationship with God.

The particular ‘why-problem’ I have been facing these past few years is understanding God’s wrath, and I have concluded that the best approach is to start from Jesus’ teaching about God’s love, and work backwards to try to understand wrath.

For me, the pinnacle has to be the outrageous, prodigal, unreasonable love as portrayed in Luke 15 – it’s just not LLM! Here’s how Brad Jersak¹ pictures it (my italic):

The father *consents* to the son’s stubborn defiance and selfish recklessness. In love, God lets him leave and *gives him over to the wrath of sin*. Then, when the son bottoms out, wakes up and heads home – when he *consents* to the father’s way – the father welcomes him home with great joy and without shame. The party resumes!

This begins to point to where I’m headed – the elements of consent and wrath. But the father’s attitude is totally unreasonable and unfair – ask the elder son!

Then there’s the prodigal farmer: Jesus’ hearers would know perfectly well that no LLM farmer would fling his seeds willy-nilly all over the place – even onto the path?! No, he would plant the seeds *in the good soil* – but God’s love is *prodigal*, not LLM.

Having started to think like this, if you look back to the OT, you see for example how God, in his wrath, says, ‘I ... am a jealous God, *punishing the children for the sin of the parents* to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me’. A purely literal, logical and mechanical approach points to an actively punishing God.

I think we have to start from Jesus’ view of the loving, prodigal Father, and see God as ‘punishing’ by consenting to our waywardness. God’s wrath is then a passive giving-us-over – as in Romans 1 – to the natural results of our wrong choices.

Paul Bev. 22.2.24

¹ As I’ve struggled with the wrath of God, especially as depicted in the Old Testament, I have been helped greatly by Brad Jersak’s *A More Christ-like God* and Greg Boyd’s *Cross Vision*.