

'The wrath of God is being revealed...'

At the church I now attend, we're just about to start running a couple of Alpha courses, and I'm going to be helping on the one on Tuesday lunchtimes; another group will run on Thursday evenings, and we'll come together at different points in the course.

Part of me is excited, but part is worried. I want to share the joy I now feel in this loving relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit – but will Alpha present God in this glorious relational way? I'm thinking back to "basic Christianity courses I have known" and shuddering. I'm trying not to be negative in these essays, but the more I realise the wonder of this really GOOD news, the more I realise how I (we) have misrepresented it for so many years. I'll give you two negative memories before contrasting it with the more positive approach I'm groping and stumbling towards. (My new life *feels* good, but I need to know that it's properly founded in Scripture, and isn't just my wishful thinking.)

The absolute lowest point on an evangelistic course was when a curate at my former church asked the assembled group, "If you arrived at the gates of heaven and wanted to be allowed in, what would you say?" Setting aside for a moment the vision of heaven as a walled and gated compound, you can imagine the responses that attendees came up with. "Actually, that's wrong," announced the curate, "The Bible says that, however hard we try, we can never be good enough, because God is holy. But the good news is that God loves us so much that he provides a better way through which we can gain access to heaven." Well, I can't remember his exact words, but that was the gist.

Less unhelpful but more relevant to the positive expression that I'm reaching towards, we had discussions several years earlier when we were trying to decide on a suitable course. We found quite a good course, but it just needed a bit of tweaking. So we wrote an extra session to go *before* the evening where we told them about sin (followed the week after, of course, by the cross – the solution to the problem). This session explained about the holiness of God, because you can't really understand the awfulness of sin until you appreciate the holiness of God.

But enough of the negative, sorry.

For a while now, I've been wrestling with the wrath of God (so to speak). I cannot and will not sing, "On the cross when Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied" because it is so easily misunderstood – it paints a very different picture of God from Jesus' description of a God who hitches up his skirts, runs down the road, hugs his son, hardly allowing him time to get out the first line of his prepared 'sinner's prayer'. The father shouts to everyone, "Rejoice! My son has come home! It's party time!"

But, yes, the wrath of God is plainly there in Scripture, so I can't ignore it. And it's not just in the Old Testament. In the NIV New Testament, the word 'wrath' occurs 31 times. Ten of those are in Revelation, but I'd expect some wrath, as God finally sorts out the mess we've created. Of the remaining 21, only four are in the Gospels: two directed by Jesus against the Pharisees, one about the end times and one in John 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' (my emphasis).

The remaining 17 are all in the Pauline writings, especially Romans. I'm not going to excise my namesake's writings from the New Testament, so let's face it square on. As I say, here I'm struggling, stumbling forward towards an understanding that combines the incredible love, mercy, forgiveness and grace of the 'Prodigal Father', with the idea of God's wrath.

(Attached below are a few thoughts on each of the passages that refer to God's wrath, in case they might be helpful.)

So when I mentioned the wrath of God, what came to your mind? What have we been taught about the wrath of God over the years? What do you think of when I start this quote?... **Romans 1:18** *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against...* [please spend some time thinking about this – or maybe I can prompt you?] Wasn't there some stuff about “*sinful desires*” and “*sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another*”? And then “*filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.*” Phew! I'm not surprised that God was angry with us! Quite right!

No, *no, no!* That's totally wrong! Yes, those are quotes from Romans 1, but I've deliberately led you into a false reading of the passage, and a wrong view of God's wrath.

We see it like this: We do things wrong therefore God is wrathful. Absolutely incorrect, sorry!

Let's go back to Romans 1 and start again. Let's check out the context...

16. I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. 17 For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

I don't know any Greek, but I remember a preacher once saying that ‘righteousness’ wasn't so much about **doing** the right things, but about **living** in a right relationship with God (Yes, I know I'm harping on again about relationships, but that's what has transformed life for me of late!)

Be that as it may, Paul says that the “good news” is received by faith; by trusting God; by coming to God and trusting that the love he offers is real – that same love that Jesus talked about again, *and again, and again.*

So that's the context. Now, heads down, here comes the ‘wrath’ bit!...

*18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who **suppress the truth** by their wickedness, 19. since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. (my emphasis)*

God is cross with people who, although they know the truth, somehow hide it from (themselves and from) other people.

20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

I find this very interesting because at the point in my life where I pulled out of the sect and thought “Maybe God doesn’t even exist, and it’s all wishful thinking!” – I then thought, “No! What I see of the world around me convinces me that, at the very least, God does exist.” Then because, in the sect, we’d spent a lot of time looking at Jesus’ life and sayings in the Gospels, I turned there to look for the truth. (Sorry, I’m getting distracted.)

21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

When people actually know God and yet refuse to acknowledge him, they then build up their own ways of interpreting the world around them – this can take many forms, even ones that look very religious, but if they’re not based on knowing the love of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it’s just creating God in man’s own image. And what’s the result...?

24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another etc, etc, etc.

The **result** of not living in a loving relationship with God is broken relationships, pain, sorrow, anger, alienation, loneliness... you name it!

Anyone, *anyone*, **anyone** who wants to live in relationship with God will not, *not*, **not** have to face the wrath of God. Just show the slightest hint of wanting to head home to God, and he’ll come racing out to meet you, arms open wide to embrace you and he’ll throw a party because he’s so pleased to have you back.

That’s why this is all really, *really*, **really GOOD NEWS!**

Paul Bev. 02.10.18

*Matt 3:7 “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming **wrath**?”*

*Luke 3:7 “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming **wrath**?”*

The Pharisees were, par excellence, those who studied the Scriptures, in order to tell people what they must do to please God. And Jesus told them off for laying burdens on people’s shoulders and then not being willing to help them carry those burdens.

*21:20. “When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. 21 Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. 22 For this is the time of punishment in fulfilment of all that has been written. 23 How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and **wrath** against this people. 24 They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.*

This is about the end times, I think, and though I haven’t really spent time studying this passage, I don’t think it’s saying anything to contradict what I’ve suggested above, do you?

*John 3: The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. 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.*

As I’ve said above, the wrath only comes on those who **reject** Jesus, and even then, the wrath isn’t what God’s going to do to you if you reject Jesus; rather it’s the inevitable result of what you are doing to yourself by rejecting Jesus’ love.

Romans

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

I’ve referred to this above.

*2:5 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*

Once again, it’s if we **reject** God’s love and God’s way that we are bringing God’s wrath on ourselves.

*2:8 But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be **wrath** and anger.*
Ditto.

*3:5 But if our unrighteousness brings out God’s righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his **wrath** on us? (I am using a human argument.) 6. Certainly not!*

A simple comment here can’t deal with this. It’s part of a bigger argument that needs further study, but again, it does **not** support the idea of God zapping us because we’ve done wrong.

*4:14 For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, 15 because law brings **wrath**.*

Again, this is part of a bigger argument.

*5:9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s **wrath** through him!*

Through Jesus’ death on the cross, we are reconciled to God, so the wrath (which we know comes to those who actively reject God’s way) will definitely not be coming our way. Hallelujah!

9:22 *What if God, choosing to show his **wrath** and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his **wrath** – prepared for destruction? 23 What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory – 24 even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?*

If God chooses to have grace on us and forgive us, even when we stray, can we say “God shouldn’t do that! A holy God should condemn sin!” What?! Are we trying to tell God what he should and shouldn’t do?! Yes, we rebel, and no, we don’t deserve to be forgiven, but if God wants to contradict what’s “just and fair” he can do so, if he chooses. The older brother was convinced that what his father had done in forgiving his brother manifestly wasn’t fair – and he was right, it wasn’t fair – but let God be God! (I’m currently re-reading – for about the fourth time! – Philip Yancey’s *What’s so amazing about grace?*, and I’m finding it really helpful on this issue.)

12:19 *Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s **wrath**.*

Same idea here, really. When someone hurts us, or hurts someone we love, we quite reasonably want to take revenge, but that’s the way of ‘ungrace’, as Yancey calls it, and it just leads to more and more pain. Leave it to God! Trust him because he knows that unjust suffering hurts (from personal experience, he can say that it hurts like Hell), but grace conquers if we ‘leave room’ for God to do it his way.

13:4 *For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of **wrath** to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.*

God can, if he chooses, use secular agents to bring about his righteousness.

Ephesians

2:3 *All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of **wrath**.*

When we lived for ourselves, yes, we suffered the consequences of our own actions. “Sin is its own punishment” is a wise expression I read recently. God doesn’t “punish” us; he doesn’t have to, because we punish ourselves.

5:6 *Let no-one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s **wrath** comes on those who are disobedient.*

Ditto.

Colossians

3:5. *Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. 6 Because of these, the **wrath** of God is coming [on those who are disobedient]. 7 You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived.*

Ditto.

(I think someone has later added that “on those who are disobedient”, as an echo of Eph 5:6. This is to avoid the possible misunderstanding that we’ve acknowledged: No, God’s wrath does *not* come on us *because of* ‘sexual immorality, impurity, lust etc’.)

1 Thessalonians

1:9 *They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming **wrath**.*

Ditto

2:14 You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, 15 who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men 16 in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The **wrath** of God has come upon them at last.

Yes, God's wrath **is** going to come on those who deliberately try to stop people hearing about the love he has for everyone.

5:9 For God did not appoint us to suffer **wrath** but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

God loves us – there's absolutely no way he would want us to suffer by turning from his love.

Revelation

6:16 They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the **wrath** of the Lamb! 17 For the great day of their **wrath** has come, and who can stand?"

What an interesting phrase, "the wrath of the Lamb"! Sounds contradictory. This needs more study, in context.

11:16 And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshipped God, 17 saying: "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. 18 The nations were angry; and your **wrath** has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great – and for **destroying those who destroy the earth.**" (my emphasis)

Again, the wrath is against those who stand against God's loving purposes.

14:9 A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, 10 he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his **wrath**. He will be tormented with burning sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb.

Ditto.

14:18 Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, "Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine, because its grapes are ripe." 19 The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's **wrath**. 20 They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1600 stadia. 15:1. I saw in heaven another great and marvellous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues – last, because with them God's **wrath** is completed.

Ditto.

15:7 Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the **wrath** of God, who lives for ever and ever. 8 And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no-one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed. 16:1. Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, "Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's **wrath** on the earth."

Ditto.

16:19 The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his **wrath**.

Ditto.

19:14 The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. 15 Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron sceptre." He treads the winepress of the fury of the **wrath** of God Almighty. 16 On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

Ditto.