

## Looking back at Grace

Last week we looked at Ephesians 2 and talked about how we are, by nature, deserving of God's wrath. We're bent toward doing all the things that are contrary to God's righteous goodness. "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved."<sup>1</sup> We celebrated God's amazing generosity towards us by giving us the chance, by grace through faith, to be saved from His wrath. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

We love talking about God's goodness, kindness, mercy, and holiness. But, when it comes to wrath, many of us shudder. We don't know how to approach it or what to do with it. Sometimes, Christians seem apologetic about God's wrath as if it's some kind of blemish on the face of God's character. But it isn't. God's wrath "...is as integral to His nature as His other perfections...any study of God's character that does not include wrath is an incomplete study."<sup>3</sup> Whether we like the idea or not, God is a God of wrath. But that doesn't sit well with most Christians, and I think I know why...we don't get it. We don't understand why God is wrathful. We don't see how wrath aligns with the rest of His unblemished attributes. Part of the reason we struggle with the idea of God's wrath is because we describe God's perfections, His flawlessness, His absolute purity, in human sorts of terms. And when we hear things like wrath, we think of the wrath we've seen in other people, and we can't imagine God behaving like a wrath-filled person. Let me illustrate:

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 2:4-5

<sup>2</sup> Romans 8:1

<sup>3</sup> Evans, Anthony T. *God, himself: a journey through his attributes* (Moody, Chicago, 2020), 84.

## **The wrath of Mom**

After dinner. Time to clean up with my sister. Bickering. Bickering. Bickering. 'I don't want to load the dishwasher. It's your turn!' 'No, it's not! I did it last time. It's your turn!' On and on we went. We were unrelenting in our positions. Out of nowhere, Mom comes, enraged into the kitchen, and completely lost her mind. In a fit of fury, Mom proceeded to lift the dishes—that we were supposed to be loading into the dishwasher—off the counter and smash them across the hump that separates the two sections of the kitchen sink. Every plate, cup...everything. But it didn't stop there! Her wrath continued as she took every plate, dish and cup out of the dishwasher and crushed them over the hump. With every downward thrust she was bellowing curses and, 'I'm so sick of you two fighting! [smash] I have had enough of you! [smash] Just wait until your father gets home! [crunch]' Chunks of porcelain and glass darted about the kitchen as Mom gave full vent to her anger.

But she wasn't done. She then opened the cabinets, pulled out the stacks of plates, bowls and cups and crushed them upon the growing pile of brokenness in the sink, which overflowed onto the counters and the floor. Everything was destroyed. Not a plate or bowl or cup remained. Mom finished by screaming, "Now clean this mess up!" My sister and I stood there with our mouths open.

That wrathful demonstration was a giant temper tantrum. She was completely out of control. She lost it! Her response was not righteous. There's no doubt that she was angry, but her anger got the best of her, and her response was nasty and mean; far greater than the offense deserved. When we think of wrath, this is what we imagine. When we think about anger, this is what we're afraid of. If the wrath of a human being is so scary and out of control, imagine the wrath of God! But that is *not* how God is in His wrath. We must not think that God mirrors our inability to be angry and righteous at the same time. He is absolutely righteous in His anger and His holiness is never compromised. His wrath is one of His perfect attributes and worthy of understanding and allowing to influence how we live, and minister and worship. We need to understand God's wrath and let it shape our lives, just as we do with His

grace or holiness. That's the purpose of this series and why I want to dig into this with you today.

## **What is Wrath?**

So, if wrath is *not* a Divine temper tantrum, then what is it? There are a handful of Hebrew words translated as "wrath" in the Old Testament. They range from 'burning anger, fury, ire, passion, anger, rage' and, quite literally, 'heat,' like intense anger. In the New Testament, the primary Greek word for wrath carries the meaning of 'strong desire, violent passion, and ire.'<sup>4</sup> So, wrath isn't just an Old Testament reality; it's very present in the New Testament as well. "...[T]here are more references in Scripture to the anger, fury and wrath of God, than there are to His love and tenderness."<sup>5</sup> We much prefer talking about His love and kindness. But His wrath is an inescapable reality.

So, with all this in mind, here's how theologians and scholars define wrath: One says, "God's wrath means that He intensely hates all sin."<sup>6</sup> Another describes wrath as "God's righteous anger."<sup>7</sup> One pastor defines it as, "[God's] necessary, just, and righteous retribution against sin."<sup>8</sup> Another theologian says, "The wrath of God is His eternal detestation of all unrighteousness...It is the holiness of God stirred into activity against

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<sup>4</sup> Geisler, Norman L. *Systematic Theology in One Volume* (Bastion Books, Arlington, 2021), 600. [For examples, see Ex 15:7, Ex 22:24, Num 11:33, Ps 59:13, 2 Chron 19:2, Eph 2:3, Col 3:6, 1 Thess 5:9, Rev 6:16]

<sup>5</sup> Pink, A.W. *The Attributes of God* (Reiner Pub., Swengel, PA, 1968 [Reprint]), 75.

<sup>6</sup> Grudem, Wayne Arden. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1994), 206.

<sup>7</sup> Stewart, Don. "What is the Wrath of God?" Blue Letter Bible, [https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/stewart\\_don/faq/the-personal-attributes-of-god/13-what-is-the-wrath-of-god.cfm](https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/stewart_don/faq/the-personal-attributes-of-god/13-what-is-the-wrath-of-god.cfm)

<sup>8</sup> Evans, 84.

sin.”<sup>9</sup> Another scholar says that “wrath refers to His absolute opposition to sin and evil.”<sup>10</sup>

You can tell by the variety of definitions that some think wrath simply describes the anger, the hatred, God feels toward sin. Which is correct. Others think that wrath is a combination of God *feeling* anger and *showing* His anger. It’s a combo of His hatred of sin (how He feels) and the action He takes against it (how He shows His anger). I think that’s right, too, because when we see God’s righteous anger in the Bible, we very often see it expressed through judgment at the same time. Not always, but often. Wrath is very closely tied to judgment or Justice. So, for the sake of our time together today, this is the definition I will use: Wrath is God’s necessary, holy, and just response to sin. His response may be white-hot anger, with delayed judgment (which is why we’ve had the chance to know Christ and be saved from His wrath. God was patient and delayed judgment). Or His hatred toward sin could lead to immediate judgment (think about Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5).

His wrath is necessary because a holy God will never be okay with sin. It’s repulsive to Him and He *must* respond to it. By definition, sin must be punished, even if it’s delayed. And His response will always be holy. Unlike our response, His will be perfect. His wrath will never be cruel or vindictive. And His response to sin will always be just because God is the righteous Judge. An unjust god isn’t trustworthy or reliable or good. An unjust god is fickle and erratic, unworthy of worship. Imagine what God would be like if He *didn’t* hate sin and respond to it. He would either be untroubled by it or somehow delight in it. That’s totally inconsistent with the perfection of the righteous, holy, immutable, loving God that we worship. Wrath is God’s necessary, holy and just response to sin.

## **Expressions of Wrath**

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<sup>9</sup> Pink, 75.

<sup>10</sup> Millikin, J. A. (2003). [Wrath, Wrath of God](#). In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen, & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (p. 1688). Holman Bible Publishers.

Throughout the Bible, we see expressions of God's hatred of sin. Adam and Eve are cursed and sent from the garden in judgment. The Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the earth opening and swallowing Korah and his men for treating the LORD with contempt, the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, the giving over of the Romans to their perversions and ways hostile to God<sup>11</sup> and what we read about the coming 'Day of Wrath,' all display God's wrath in different ways. Some are present, some are future, and some are eternal. God's wrath may deliver earthly or temporal consequences or those which will last for eternity.

We see God's wrath as He responds to idolatry, injustice, oppression, the stubborn refusal to repent and receive His grace and many other ways.

### ***Temporal***

I want to show you an example of this from Nahum 1. God is about to unleash His righteous anger upon the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. The city was godless, idolatrous, full of violence, lust and greed. God had used the Assyrians to discipline His people for their unfaithfulness, but also promised that they would regain their freedom. God is faithful to His covenant people and, though they faced His temporary judgment and discipline, He loves them and wants them to live freely in right relationship with Him. Check out Nahum 1:2-6. [READ]

"The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath.

The LORD takes vengeance on his foes and vents his wrath against his enemies. The LORD is slow to anger but great in power; the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished.[That sounds like Exodus 34 from last week] His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and dries it up; he makes all the rivers run dry. Bashan and Carmel wither and the blossoms of Lebanon fade. The mountains quake before him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it. Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him."

That's hefty. It's a grim picture. And those hearing Nahum's words might wilt at the weight of them. 'Who can endure His wrath?' So, God gave

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<sup>11</sup> Romans 1:18-32

them verse 7, The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him...

Yes, God's wrath is about to be unleashed, *but* for those who know and love God, you're safe. You don't have to be afraid and you don't have a thing to worry about! The Lord's kindness oozes out of verse 7, reminding them of what is true.

Verse 3 says that God is slow to anger, but just because He's patient doesn't mean He's powerless. His patience doesn't mean He's ignorant. God is so good that sin cannot be overlooked. By the year 612 B.C., Nineveh was in ruins and by the turn of the century the Assyrians disappeared from history. That's an earthly, a temporal expression, of God's wrath with some eternal implications. It's the real deal. He's not messing around. When He unleashes His holy fury, His justice is *just right*. Please remember: God's wrath is not the result of a bad mood; it's not rash or spiteful. It's always administered perfectly. It is His necessary, holy and just response to sin.

Look again at a text from last week, Exodus 34:6-7. [READ]

As the Lord was passing in front of Moses he proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty *unpunished*; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation."

We see again that God is slow to anger, meaning that He feels anger toward sin, but is willing to delay His judgment on it because He is gracious and wants to give people the opportunity to repent and place their complete trust in Him. Thousands of generations will be blessed as they lean into His mercy and grace. *Yet*, the guilty will be punished. Who are the guilty? Those who still have their sin resting on them...those who haven't trusted God in His mercy and grace. It's always been the same story. Those who refuse to be saved by grace through faith are still under the guilt of their sin and are still, 'deserving of wrath' (Ephesians 2:3). They're still guilty. Their sin still hangs on them because they have refused God's

grace. Jesus took care of all the details and presents the gift, but if the gift is refused, then the guilt still rests on the sinner.

So, what is the punishment of the children for the sins of the parents to the third and fourth generation? Most of us don't have to look past our own families to see the impact that the sins of parents have on their children. The children of alcoholic, addicted, abusive, absent, critical, or immoral parents suffer greatly. And, those sinful behaviors are very often caught by their children, who adopt those sins as their own and pass them on to the next generation. Those sins are 'normal' in their lives and, unless the chain is broken, generations will be consumed by the sins of their parents.

I come from a long line of angry alcoholics, drug users, and abusers. My family of origin was full of it (those things!), and it was the direction I was heading. Gratefully, the cycle of sin and suffering can be broken through repentance;<sup>12</sup> trusting in the mercy and grace of God. And when we trust God, we're no longer guilty. Instead, we're forgiven and free. We're no longer bound to live in sin—wherever it comes from. We're now children of our Heavenly Father, and we live under the blessing, love and faithfulness given to those who have been forgiven. I'm a first-generation believer. By God's grace, the chains of anger, alcoholism, addiction and abuse are broken. My youngest said to me a few weeks ago, "It's amazing how far you've come given the family you grew up in." He's right! And we had a conversation about how much farther he could go in his life and with his own family one day because of where he started.

God is gracious, kind, loving and willing to forgive those who trust Him. But those who don't, those who won't, His wrath is still upon them and, one day, near or far, His wrath will be poured out.

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<sup>12</sup> *The ESV Study Bible [Large Print Ed.]*, (Crossway, Wheaton, 2008), study note, 197.

One of the clearest New Testament demonstrations of God's wrath being expressed in the moment is in Romans chapter 1. Look at verses 18-23.

[READ]

<sup>18</sup> The *wrath of God is being revealed* from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, <sup>19</sup> since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. <sup>20</sup> 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 people are without excuse.

<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Paul is describing the sin that is provoking God's wrath. Not only are people denying God, they're actively trying to keep people from knowing the truth about Him. Instead of worshipping the one true God, they're worshipping other people and critters. Sound familiar? The result of this is God giving them over to that which they most want. His wrath is giving them what they're asking for. "Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another" (v 24). You want to worship sex and pursue every depravity? It won't satisfy like you think. It's empty. It's not My best for you. Ultimately, it will destroy you.

"Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones." (v 26).

This is exactly what we're seeing today—sexual freedom above all else. When God gives you over to something other than what He knows is best, you *know* that's bad. It's like when your kids find the 'baking chocolate' in the pantry and want to eat it, thinking it's the chocolate the know and love. You tell them it's gonna be bitter and gross, but they don't believe you. They *insist* that they want to eat it. So, you say, 'Okay, but you're not gonna like it!' And they eat it and try to pretend that it's actually good (little liars!). Giving them over to what they want.



“Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done” (v 28).

God has removed the safety features and abandoned them to a depraved lifestyle. “God will let people get so crazy in their sin that they can no longer think right, perceive right, or act right. They go stark-raving mad spiritually, morally, physically, ethically and every other way.”<sup>13</sup> Verses 29-32 detail the insanity. “Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, quarreling, deception, malicious behavior, and gossip. They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud, and boastful. They invent new ways of sinning, and they disobey their parents. They refuse to understand, break their promises, are heartless, and have no mercy. They know God’s justice requires that those who do these things deserve to die, yet they do them anyway. Worse yet, they encourage others to do them, too.”<sup>14</sup> Look at our society. What things do you think God has given us over to? When God gives you over to the sin you so enjoy, it’s not freedom. It’s His wrath. (Romans 1:18-32) Paul describes three ways in which people exchanged the truth of God for something else, something less (verses 23, 25, 26) and three times he says God ‘gave them over’ (literally ‘abandoned’ them) to practices that manifested His judgment against them in this life (verses 24, 26, 28). “As people reject God’s standards and afflict themselves by their disobedience, their sin becomes their punishment.”<sup>15</sup>

## **Eternal**

The idea of God’s temporal, earthly, wrath is deeply disturbing. But at least there may be chances, while still on this side of eternity that, by His grace, people can recognize their sinfulness, repent, place their faith in Him and be saved. But temporal wrath is not the end of the story. Some of you were wondering when I was going to get to this part...God’s wrath also has *eternal* implications.

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<sup>13</sup> Evans, 93.

<sup>14</sup> Romans 29-32, NLT

<sup>15</sup> Rydelnik, M. & Vanlaningham, M. *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Moody Publishers, Chicago, 2014), 1745.

The Bible teaches that there is a future outpouring of God's wrath (that's being stored up) that will have eternal repercussions, for which there will be no chance of change. When the things we read about in the book of Revelation, the catastrophic upheavals in the universe (6:12-17), 'the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty'(19:15), and the 'cup of His fury' (14:10), when these things unfold, it will be too late. When Christ returns as Judge, there will be a final manifestation of God's righteous anger on all who have been storing up His wrath against themselves.

That's Romans 2:5, " 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." There are people who stubbornly refuse to follow God. They don't want His forgiveness (because they've 'not done anything wrong'). They don't need to be saved from God's wrath because they don't believe it's coming. God has been mercifully patient, but they've taken His patience to mean that He doesn't care about their sin. One day, His patience will end.

"In Revelation 20, John describes the great and final judgment when Satan and those who reject Christ will be thrown into the 'lake of fire' along with 'death and Hades'...The lake of fire is eternal punishment [and its] inhabitants 'will be tormented day and night forever and ever' (v 10)."<sup>16</sup> God's wrath is being stored up and payment is going to come due. So, you may *think* that so-in-so has it easy, doesn't walk with God, has all the money, popularity and possessions while you're over here, trusting God, working diligently to make ends meet and haven't had a date in months. Why's that guy have it so easy? Just wait friend. He's storing up wrath and if he doesn't receive the gift of God's grace by faith, God's wrath will rain an eternal consequence upon him: final judgment and an eternity separated from God in Hell. You, on the other hand, may have it rough for now, but if you've leaned into God's saving grace, your eternity is secure.

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<sup>16</sup> Evans, 95.

You're covered by the finished work of Jesus. He will give you the grace you need, moment by moment, each day. You may have trials and struggles today, but your 'forever' is going to be incredible!

But that's not the case for those who face God's wrath in the end. Ultimately, the righteous Judge, Jesus, will give people what they deserve. Grace is getting what you don't deserve. Wrath is getting what you do deserve (Ephesians 2:3). Some think the final judgment, the last outpouring of God's wrath, is overkill; it's too much. But it isn't! His wrath is one of his perfect attributes; never too much or too little. It's an extension of His holiness and an appropriate response to His hatred of sin. There's no way He's allowing sin into the New Heaven and New Earth (Revelation 21). He wants nothing to do with it. He wants it dealt with and gone. That's why Jesus came: to deal with it once and for all! People who have come to Jesus and placed their faith in Him have no worries of God's wrath—temporal or eternal—because it's already been dealt with, and it's gone (Psalm 103).

People say, "I can't believe a good God would send anyone to Hell." Remind those friends: Hell is *not* what He wants for them. He wants *everyone* to be saved.<sup>17</sup> But if they don't *want* the gift that He offers, then God won't force it on them. You can either accept that your debt has been paid through God's wrath poured out on Jesus in your place, or accept that you'll receive God's wrath on yourself. I know that sounds harsh, but that's the reality. J.I. Packer says, "The unbeliever has preferred to be by himself, without God, defying God, having God against him, and he shall have his preference. Nobody stands under the wrath of God except those who have chosen to do so."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> John 3:16-18

<sup>18</sup> Packer, 153.

So, if you don't want to experience God's wrath, then flee from it.<sup>19</sup> Come to Jesus! Put your complete trust in Him and receive His amazing, gracious gift of forgiveness, new life and a wrath-free future. And those who've already done that, tell everyone you know how they can get connected with Jesus! He doesn't want anyone to perish, but for all to be saved. When you walk with Jesus, God's wrath is no longer upon you. Your debt is paid.

### *Opportunity*

If you're listening this morning and realize that you're still an object of God's wrath, because you've never received his grace and forgiveness, because you haven't placed your faith in Him, and you want to change all that; if you want to give your life to God today, will you stand? Like I said last week, we want to see you and celebrate with you. New life and being out from under God's wrath is worth celebrating! And I want to pray for you. [Connect Card & Prayer]

### **God's Wrath Inspires**

God's wrath is uncomfortable to talk about. We struggle with the idea that God is both the God of love and wrath. It's hard for us to remember that human expressions of wrath and God's expressions are not the same. He is holy. He is perfect. He is just. He is righteous. He is unchanging. He is not impulsive, erratic, moody, or spiteful.

We need to think about God's wrath differently. God's wrath should inspire us to praise Him for His amazing love and patience; to worship Him with hearts of joy because He has made the way for us to be forgiven and free. God's wrath should motivate us to share the Good News of His love with everyone we see because we don't want anyone to experience a Christ-less eternity. We don't want anyone to be on the receiving end of God's wrath. Some of you are thinking, 'I can think of a couple people who totally deserve it.' I get it! But God says that He doesn't want "anyone

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<sup>19</sup> Matthew 3:7, Luke 3:7

to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”<sup>20</sup> Let’s allow God’s wrath to stir our gratitude, knowing that one day, everything will be made right and that we can look forward to an eternity with Him where sin will never be an issue. Imagine eternity without a whisper of sin.

### **Wrap**

God’s wrath is hard for us, but my hope, starting now, is that we will praise Him for it just as we praise Him for His holiness, love and grace. When you think of God’s wrath, it may bring a shiver down your spine, but let it move you to worship Him because you’re grateful and because He is worthy of all glory and honor forever and ever.

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<sup>20</sup> 2 Peter 3:9