

THEISM

The Wrath of God

Scripture requires that people should not be wrathful (Psalm 37:8; Romans 12:19; Ephesians 4:31; Colossians 3:8). Human wrath is inconsistent with the righteousness of God (James 1:20). Those who are wrathful cannot enter the kingdom of heaven (Galatians 5:19-21).

Even so, scripture declares that God is wrathful. God was angry with the Israelites because they complained after leaving Mt. Sinai on their way to the Promised Land. Therefore God, in his wrath, consumed some of them with fire (Numbers 11:1). When they complained about the Manna they were receiving from heaven and wanted meat instead, God gave them meat, but “while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the wrath of the LORD was aroused against the people, and the LORD struck the people with a very great plague” (Numbers 11:33). God was made angry because his people forsook him, broke their covenant with him, and worshipped idols (Deuteronomy 29:21-28). From the time of their leaving Egypt until they were about to cross over into the Promised Land, the Israelites provoked God to anger (Deuteronomy 9:7-8). After the Israelites had destroyed the city of Jericho, the anger of the Lord burned against them because Achan had taken some of the spoils of the city for himself (Joshua 7:1 ; see also Joshua 22:20). When the Law was given at Mt. Sinai, God commanded that the priests carry the Ark of the Covenant by hand, but when the Ark was later moved on an ox cart and seemed about to fall off, it was steadied by Uzzah who was not a priest. Because Uzzah’s action angered the Lord, God struck Uzzah dead (2 Samuel 6:5-7). Isaiah declared that God was angry with Israel because they rejected the law of the Lord and rejected the Holy One of Israel. God would therefore reject his people (Isaiah 5:24-26). In his fury, God gave Israel over to robbers for plundering because they were not obedient to his law (Isaiah 42:24-25). Because in great wickedness Judah turned to worship idols, God was provoked to anger. Although he sent prophets among them to admonish them not to do terrible things, they would not listen. Therefore, God’s anger was poured out upon the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem so that they became wasted and desolate (Jeremiah 44:2-6). Nations who go against God are subject to his wrath (Psalms 2:1-6). The prophet Zephaniah spoke of a day of wrath, meaning a future time when God would bring his judgment against the Israelites for their wickedness (Zephaniah 1:12-18). The prophet Isaiah referred to the day of the Lord as a day of anger against the Babylonians for their great evil (Isaiah 13:1-22). God’s wrath is aroused by such things as unbelief and disobedience (Hebrews 3:18, 19), idolatry (Deuteronomy 32:19-22; 2 Kings 22:17; Jeremiah 44:3), apostasy (Hebrews 10:26-27), and refusal to repent (Romans 2:5).

Other declarations of God’s wrath could also be given, but these are sufficient to indicate that the God who is said to be good and gracious is also declared to be a God of wrath. This poses a problem for some people. How can God’s goodness and graciousness be reconciled with his wrath? And, why is wrathfulness forbidden to humans but acceptable for God?

The answer is that God’s goodness demands that he not allow excessive evil. Whereas God does not sin, human wrath generally results from sin. God’s wrath stems from his execution of righteous judgment against sinful humanity. While God is “longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9), God has limits on tolerating sin. Only after God saw that “the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5) did God destroy the world with a flood. Only after the iniquity of the Amorites was complete, did

God have them destroyed by leading the Israelites to forcefully take their land (Genesis 15:6; Leviticus 18:25; 1 Kings 21:26). Whenever people turned from their wickedness, God either relented or diminished the measure of his wrath (See 2 Chronicles 12:7, 12; 32:26; Jonah 3:10; Matthew 12:41; Luke 11:32). Moreover, God sometimes relented of his intended destruction of his people (Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 78:38; 106:23, 40-45; Jeremiah 26:19; Amos 7:3, 6). God's wrath may be stayed (2 Chronicles 30:8) whenever evil is not excessive and repentance is possible. When people do not repent, however, the wrath of God is certain. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18; see also Matthew 11:20-24).

Jesus himself illustrated the nature of God's grace and his wrath in his message about Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31). While God was gracious in giving poor Lazarus rest in Abraham's bosom, he brought severe judgment against a rich man who shared not his abundance with the poor. God's graciousness and his wrath is further portrayed in many of Jesus' parables, e.g., of the householder (Matthew 24:43-51), of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46), of a certain nobleman (Luke 19:11-27), etc. On another occasion, Jesus said that "he who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). However, Jesus warned about forsaking God. He warned that "unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3, 5). He warned that "if anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned" (John 15:6). God's wrath is toward sinners, whereas his grace is granted to penitent believers through Jesus (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

Jesus is the reason why believers have access to the grace of God. "Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:1-2). Jesus is also the reason why believers are saved from the wrath of God. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him" (Romans 5:8-9). However, Jesus is the "author of eternal salvation" only "to all who obey him" (Hebrews 5:9).

While living on earth, we can choose to believe or disbelieve God, to obey or disobey. Depending on our choice, God will either bless or curse. At death we face God's eternal judgment (Hebrews 9:27; Acts 17:31). For some it will be a day of wrath, for others a day of glory. Peter realized that "the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (1 Peter 4:17). Paul observed that God "will render to each one according to his deeds": eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness; indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil" (Romans 2:6-9). Jude said this would be a time "to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him" (15). The author of Hebrews observed that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31).

God's wrath is toward the disobedient, but he is gracious toward obedient believers.