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1 - What do We Mean by the “Wrath of God”?

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In many ancient societies the “gods” were perceived as somewhat unfriendly and had to be placated in order to avoid inviting their anger upon human society. And even among Christians, it is easy to slip into a mindset that thinks of God as a similar kind of Being who is apt to get angry with us whenever we might slip the slightest bit out of line. But the example of Jesus, who always referred to God as “*Father*”, became the illustration for us of how *God the Father* actually feels towards the human race.

(Jesus speaking:) Always he [the Evil One] seeks to paint Me as one who... does not understand or know your heart and soul; who is not concerned about your weaknesses and frailties; one who is only interested in quick results and progress... not of you or your well-being and happiness. He paints Me as a stern, unfeeling physician at the end of your hospital bed, while you lie anxiously upon your bed awaiting My verdict, watching Me as I pensively and judgmentally chart your progress. He always fails to highlight the most important things: My great and all-encompassing love for you, and unfailing desire to do all I can for you. [from publication of *The Family International*, June 2001]

But still, we might wonder, for example, in John chapter 3, where Jesus teaches, “*God so loved the world... did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world...*” (3:16-17) Then a little further we read the words of John the Baptist: “*he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.*” (3:36)

On the surface, this passage in verse 36 doesn’t seem to jibe well with what verses 16-17 have just said about the love of God. If God is love and doesn’t want “*to condemn the world*”, then why should a person - let’s say someone who has never heard about Jesus in a meaningful way - be doomed to suffer the “*wrath of God*”? Probably, there are millions of people like this who are relatively innocent because of simple lack of awareness or understanding.

At this point it will help to straighten out some fundamental misunderstandings about two of the words in this passage of John 3:36 - “*believe*” and “*wrath*”. In the first part of verse 36 - “*he who believes in the Son*” - the word “*believe*” comes from the Greek *pisteuo* and was used for a wide range of levels of belief: from mere acknowledgment of Christ’s existence - “*even the demons believe and tremble*” (James 2:19) - to whole-hearted commitment and obedience to Christ - “*he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also.*” (John 14:12)

Then in the next part of the verse are the words “*not believe*”, which comes from the Greek verb *apeitheo*. In the *New Testament*, it is translated as “not believe” and an equal number of times as “be disobedient”. And the noun-adjective forms of *apeitheo* are translated as “disobedience” and “disobedient”.

All that to say, the issue here involves more than just unbelief but includes also the issue of rebellion and disobedience. And where we read “*he who believes in the Son*”, that contrasts with what follows: “*he who does not believe the Son*”, referring to those who are rebellious and disobedient to the Son, the “*Light of the world*”.

That context tells us that “believe” here refers to the stronger kind of belief that includes obedience and submission to God. Unfortunately, this deeper sense of the word “believe” is not how we understand it any more. Today, “believe” just means to “regard something as true”. But to regard a belief as true does not mean necessarily that one is living or obeying that belief.

We should ask then, are all the people who know little or nothing about Jesus “disobedient”? Well, the Spirit of God is able to reach into many corners of the world where the Gospel has not yet penetrated. And it is possible that some who don’t know the Gospel are more “obedient” than some who do know it - which must have something to do with Paul’s words in Romans 2:

For merely listening to the law doesn’t make us right with God. It is obeying the law that makes us right in his sight.

Even Gentiles, who do not have God’s written law, show that they know his law when they instinctively obey it, even without having heard it.

They demonstrate that God’s law is written in their hearts, for their own conscience and thoughts either accuse them or tell them they are doing right. And this is the message I proclaim—that the day is coming when God, through Christ Jesus, will judge everyone’s secret life.

(Romans 2:13-16, NLT)

Surely, for many people, their coming to the Father, if it does not happen in this lifetime, will still happen... in the Afterlife. They did not have opportunity to choose to believe in the Son during their earthly lifetime, nor did they choose to disbelieve. So what provision has God made for them? This is a big question that we shall explore further ahead.

Now, what about the word “*wrath*”? We may have cause to wonder, does it give us the right idea of what was originally meant in this passage?

There can be no question that sin and wrongdoing are contrary to God’s nature and therefore, He should be angry at those things. We would be quite surprised and disappointed if He isn’t. It is the same anger we feel when we hear of the horrors and injustices that happen in the world because of the misdeeds and schemes of evil persons.

God hates evil. He hates what it does to humanity. He hates the damage it does to those whom He loves, which is everyone. He loves us deeply and is opposed to and abhors those things which hurt and destroy us. His anger isn’t rage or temper that is out of control; it’s not that God loses His temper and flies off the handle and destroys people or things. He is holy, and His anger is what happens when His holiness and righteousness encounter sin. [from [“God’s Wrath”](#) by Peter Amsterdam in the series *The Heart of it All: the Nature and Character of God*]

Our difficulty with the word “*wrath*” does not lie with the fact of God’s anger against sin. That is a given. The dictionary definition for “*wrath*” (when applied to God’s wrath) is

**“Retributory punishment for an offense or a crime: divine chastisement” (Merriam Webster Dictionary),
“Righteous indignation on the part of the Deity” (Oxford Dictionary).**

Those phrases - retributory punishment, divine chastisement, righteous indignation - provide the kind of deep understanding that accurately conveys what God’s anger means.

There are consequences to those who are “*practicing evil*” and “*hate the light*” (John 3:20), which in time they will certainly regret. And surely, the message in John 3:36 was meant sincerely as a warning about the consequences of loving

“darkness rather than light” (John 3:19).

But unfortunately, the word “wrath” has taken on a different meaning to what it meant in the translations of a few centuries ago. For us today, the word “*wrath*” expresses a kind of vengeful, fearsome rage that doesn’t seem to jibe with what verses 16-17 have just said about the love of God. Nowadays the word is even used mockingly to describe the foolish attribute of someone who is too short-tempered.

If God is love and doesn’t want “*to condemn the world*”, then we would expect that His “anger” doesn’t come in sudden outbursts - impulsive and irritable - the way human anger often does. But in the word “*wrath*”, as it is used nowadays, that is what comes to mind pretty much.

There are two Greek words translated as “wrath” or “anger” in the Bible: *orge* and *thumos*. Here is a definition of these words:

ORGE... The *orge* attributed to God in the N.T. is *that in God which stands opposed to man’s disobedience, obduracy (esp. in resisting the gospel) and sin, and manifests itself in punishing the same: Jn 3:36; etc. [“Obduracy” means “hardened, stubborn”.]*

THUMOS... *passion, angry heat... anger forthwith boiling up and soon subsiding again, (orge, on the other hand, denotes indignation which has arisen gradually and become more settled...).*

[from Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (published 1901)]

So, the Greek word *orge*, when applied to God’s “anger”, means simply that He “stands opposed to man’s disobedience” and sin and stubborn resistance to the Gospel - “indignation”, yes, but that “which has arisen gradually and become more settled”. Unlike human anger, it doesn’t come in sudden outbursts - impulsive, irritable, or unpredictable. It is reasonable, justified, and has the purpose of purification.

As for the other type of more fearsome anger - *thumos* - even this is qualified in the phrase “soon subsiding again”. It expresses a more extreme kind of anger and is applied several times in the *Book of Revelation* to the final *Wrath of God* when the kingdoms of this present world will be destroyed in the process of making way for the coming Kingdom of God.

In the *Old Testament* this fearsome kind of anger was sometimes felt by His

people of that era when they flagrantly defied God and His rules of conduct. But the punishment was followed always by a period of mercy and restoration, once the people’s hearts had turned back to the Lord. That kind of anger - *thumos* - was applied sometimes to the nation of Israel, on a corporate level.

But when it comes to God’s personal dealings with errant individuals, the word *orge* is used - 13 times in the Books of the *New Testament*. Only once is *thumos* used - in connection with the souls who have worshiped the *Beast*. (Revelation 14:10). (Regarding what exactly is meant by the worshipers of the *Beast*, see [Appendix in the post “Fate of Judas”](#).)

Even then, we learn in the same verse that their punishment is carried out “*in the presence of the holy angels and... the Lamb*.” The punishment or chastisement will be severe, of course, but why are the *Lamb* and the angels there? Mainly to guard and maintain the boundaries of the prison would be one very good reason. But could it not be that they are there also, like judges, to tailor the punishments to the crimes of each individual, and even to keep an eye out for any who are turning toward genuine repentance?

The Greek word used in this passage of John 3:36 is *orge* - a word which points to God’s calm and steady opposition to and chastisement of human disobedience and stubborn unbelief. But the English translation - “*wrath*” - is misleading. It doesn’t seem to convey the true sense of the Greek *orge*.

No doubt, some people need and deserve a shock treatment because of their evil deeds. But for many unbelievers, such punishment would not fit their “crime” of unbelief, especially when that unbelief is more a question of ignorance than of disobedience or rejection. And if they are just ignorant and come from a cultural environment that did not promote or teach faith in Christ, then we can expect that God’s fairness and justice will come into play.

This is a principle that Jesus outlined in His parable about the wise and unwise stewards: “*And that servant who knew his master’s will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.*” (Luke 12:47-48) In this parable, the master’s concern had more to do with the servant’s deeds and obedience to standards of right and less to do with their belief system.

The same can be said about what Jesus taught in the Parable of the Final Judgment ([Matthew 25:31-46](#)). Those who cared for the destitute were honored and welcomed into the Kingdom, even though they did not think of themselves as having served Christ. Whereas those who thought they had served Christ were rejected because they had failed to show concern for the destitute.

And we could add here, “*We have known and believed the love that God has for us.*” (1John 4:16) God has great love, care, and concern for us - His frail, fallible human creations. Even the Old Testament expresses this view, as in Psalm 103:8-14, where we read,

The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in mercy... As a father pities His children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him; He remembers that we are dust. (103:8,13-14)

And there are many other passages expressing similar thoughts.

Of course, we understand also from our earthly experience that a good father who cares for his children must at times discipline them. Likewise, we understand that there are times when God’s “care” for us must come in the form of discipline for wrongdoing. However, even when justifiably angry, we know from experience that God measures His responses and dishes them out in a way that offers needed chastisement and correction, combined with the hope that offenders will turn around and go in the right direction.

The word “*wrath*”, as it is used nowadays, does not get across very well this true sense of how God approaches the problem of human unbelief. His corrections for our disobediences can be severe, if warranted, but they are always tempered with love and mercy. Unbelief is a sin, of course, but a lot depends on how much a person is responsible for (as outlined above in the Scripture [Luke 12:48](#))

So how could we re-word John 3:36 so that it better expresses its real meaning? Here is a translation (from the *Amplified Bible*) that seems fairly good:

He who believes and trusts in the Son and accepts Him [as Savior] has eternal life [that is, already possesses it]; but he who does not believe the Son and chooses to reject Him, [disobeying Him and denying Him as Savior] will not see [eternal] life, but [instead] the wrath of God hangs over him continually.

That’s a better translation, although the word “wrath” could be replaced by words like “chastisement” or “correction” or “displeasure” to reflect more accurately God’s care and perspective. But at least it makes the point that God’s “*wrath*” is for those who consciously choose to reject. And this leaves open the possibility that those “unbelievers” who have not chosen to reject the Lord, will be given the opportunity to understand the Truth and find Salvation in the Afterlife.

This we can gather from the *Book of Revelation*, chapter 20. There we learn about the souls who are not sent immediately to the *Lake of Fire*, but instead land in the domain of *Death and Hades*. There it seems they have the opportunity to re-orient their lives and end up having their names written in the *Book of Life*.

The Final Judgment could be like a second chance for those who, even though they may have refused the Lord during their earthly lifetimes, were not so guilty that they had to be sent straight to the *Lake of Fire*. And it could be a first chance for those who hardly knew anything about the Lord. This seems a fairly obvious conclusion from the passage in [Revelation 20:11-15](#).

It is difficult to speculate much about the Afterlife existence. But we know God is just, fair, patient, and concerned. So why would He not give second chances, especially to those who have not committed themselves to evil?

And if they choose wisely and turn in the right direction in that Afterlife Purgatory (or whatever it is) - and it may be different for each person, tailored to individual needs - then their names will be written in the *Book of Life*, and they will be granted the privilege of entering the *New Heaven and New Earth* to come after the Age of the Millennium. But those who continue in their stubbornness and evil rebellion will be sent to the *Lake of Fire*. ([Revelation 20:15](#))

When applied to God’s personal dealings with the souls of humankind, “*wrath of God*” may not be the best English wording to use. But “*wrath*” could apply well to those times when God’s judgments are sent, such as what we read about in the *Book of Revelation*. And that is where the Greek word *thumos* (when applied to God’s extreme anger) appears most often. It expresses well His *Indignation*. Evil has held sway long enough in the Earth, and the day has come for it to be swept away.

And when God really does get angry (*thumos*), in righteous indignation, the repercussions in the Earth have been (and will be) colossal and monumental.

(Thankfully, He has told us ahead of time what to expect and has guaranteed protection for those who are His followers during that final, tumultuous era in Earth’s history.)

So it is important to distinguish between God’s extreme anger (*thumos*) and His anger (*orge*) that is more settled and steady and comes into play when dealing with human sins and weaknesses.

At this point, a good question to ask might be, how should we explain the purpose of Christ’s First Coming? If we know Him to be the Creator of our Earthly Realm, then why did He not transform everything right away when He came? Why is our world still in a big mess? The answer could be summed up in this quote from the teaching of David Pawson:

Why didn’t He clear up evil on His first visit? Because if He did, He’d have had to get rid of every one of us. He came first to save us to give us the chance to be recycled and made fit for a new world. But He’s not going to be doing that forever. The only reason His Second Coming has been so long delayed you will find in the 3rd chapter of Peter’s second Letter. It is to give the maximum opportunity for repentance - that’s why. He is so reluctant to come and deal with evil. He wants so many people to turn around and be recycled for Him, and so He’s kept it off. [David Pawson (2002), [“Book of Revelation, Part 6”](#)]

Although change often does happen suddenly, it is usually preceded by a long period of preparation. The *Book of Revelation*, plus a good many other Scriptures, inform us of the *Day of the Lord* when God will bring the sudden change we desire so much to see in the Earth and human society. But there is a long process of getting ready for that great transformation.

And it started with the First Coming of Jesus Christ. God had to become human first in order for humans to rise out of their sin-nature and so become capable of living in and ruling a just and righteous society that functions according to how God knows it should. Although God, along with His angels, could rule directly over human society, God’s real, long-term goal is for us humans to learn to rule over human society ourselves - with God’s help of course. That process has to start with eliminating the sin-nature of those who will be the members of that future society.

It would be futile to impose Divine rule over the world if its citizens are captive to the sin-nature that entered the world at its Beginning. When individuals choose

of their own free will to surrender themselves to Christ, that begins their transformation into becoming voluntary citizens of the Kingdom of God. And this is what God prefers us to be - His “*friends*” rather than mere slaves or robots who just do what they’re told to do.

“I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn’t confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me.”
(John 15:15, NLT)

Christ’s followers are getting ready for the Heavenly Realm now; others who fail to make this transformation will have to be kept in what amounts to celestial “waiting rooms” or rehabilitation centers of some kind. But eventually, God’s desire is “*that all should come to repentance*”. (2Peter 3:9)

End of Part One

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