

WRATH OF GOD

Introductory Issues

A retreat from past fundamentalism is remarkably illustrated in an article in *Christianity Today* (Feb. 2000) where nine evangelical leaders were asked to answer a simple question: "What's the Good News?" Responses varied, but a good summation thought came from David S. Dockery, president of Union University, Jackson, Tennessee: "The gospel declares that this gift is not the culmination of humanity's quest for God, but that salvation resides in the loving initiative of God toward men and women (Ephesians 1:4-7).

"The gospel maintains that men and women, who have sinned and fallen short of God's glory, can be declared righteous through faith. Experientially we still sin, but God views believers in Christ as totally righteous. Because Christ's death provided for sinners a sinless substitutionary sacrifice that satisfies divine justice and makes known God's holy love, God no longer counts our sins against us (II Corinthians 5:19-21). The good news is that we have received more than pardon; we have been granted positive favor in God's sight, and given eternal life."^[1]

This view of God's character and of salvation suggests that hell will be empty and all prophetic messages of punishment, burning of the wicked, plagues and eternal death are nothing more than parables of God's "gentle" unhappiness over sin. Love is so defining that such expressions would be at variance with God's care for mankind. Justice was met at the cross so it no longer needs expression in God's salvic plan for this earth. The logical end to this reasoning is "God winks at all sin."

In very specific messages to several types of people who called themselves Christians, Jesus pointedly said only he who overcomes will have the eternal reward of the saints (Revelation 2 and 3). For those who don't, God's displeasure is talked about in language that leaves little doubt that residual justice is still part of His character. For those who receive the *mark of the beast*, "the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God" (Revelation 14:10). That prophetic record embellishes judicial sentencing against the sinner under the sixth Seal. The wicked sense that they are under the wrath of God when they cry "hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?" (Revelation 6:16-17).

The Biblical record makes clear that a time will come when sin and its effects will be extinguished. God even has a plan to *begin again* by recreating this world (Revelation 21). The record of God's dealing with sin and unrepentant sinners is pointed and a warning. Whether it is called His retribution, wrath or indignation, the lesson is clear: at some point His mercy ceases and the end is eradication of all sinners, often preceded with severe punishment.

A dramatic example came in God's relationship to man approximately 2000 years after creation.

"Had the antediluvians believed the warning, and repented of their evil deeds, the Lord would have turned aside His wrath, as He afterward did from Nineveh. But by their obstinate

resistance to the reproofs of conscience and the warnings of God's prophet, that generation filled up the measure of their iniquity, and became ripe for destruction."[2]

"Conscience was at last aroused to know that there is a God who ruleth in the heavens. They called upon Him earnestly, but His ear was not open to their cry. In that terrible hour they saw that the transgression of God's Law had caused their ruin. Yet while, through fear of punishment, they acknowledged their sin, they felt no true contrition, no abhorrence of evil."[3]

"How those doomed sinners longed for the opportunities which they had slighted! How they 'pleaded for one hour's probation, one more privilege of mercy, one call from the lips of Noah! But the sweet voice of mercy was no more to be heard by them. Love, no less than justice, demanded that God's judgments should put a check on sin. The avenging waters swept over the last retreat, and the despisers of God perished in the black depths."[4]

The Old Testament is replete with stories of conflict between God and rebellious man. The whole plan of redemption would ultimately do away with sinners and preserve a remnant people that perfectly portrayed His character. They are to eternally vindicate to the universe God's responses to sin because of their victory over it. So special is that group to be, heaven's special favors will be theirs throughout eternity.

Sin was a foreign element to the universe. It was an intruder that had to be eliminated. But before God took that necessary step, by His love He developed a plan whereby human beings could make a personal choice to be either under His mercy and be restored or His justice and suffer eternal loss.

This concept is beautifully outlined in the story of Judah's rebellion. Jeremiah was called to be God's representative of warning. Rebellion had reached a point where intervention was necessary. As with the flood, a special template of heavenly action was set in motion.

Apostasy

Special messenger

Messages of warning

Mercy about ended

Repent or judgment

Often in this series of divine warnings, God brings mini-judgments to heighten the awareness of His servants' message. But, predictably, the wicked turn against the messenger and eventually God.

"The prophet made plain the fact that our heavenly Father allows His judgments to fall, 'that the nations may know themselves to be but men.' Psalm 9:20. 'If ye walk contrary unto Me, and will not hearken unto Me,' the Lord had forewarned His people, 'I, even I, ... will scatter you among the heathen, and will draw out a sword after you: and your land shall be desolate, and your cities waste.' Leviticus 26:21, 28, 33."[5]

"The prophet's words, instead of leading to confession and repentance, aroused the anger of

those high in authority, and as a consequence Jeremiah was deprived of his liberty. Imprisoned, and placed in the stocks.”[6]

Soon Judah was permitted to be attacked and defeated by the Chaldeans, Moabites, Syrians and Ammonites. Later the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar seized control of Judah and took away prisoners to that foreign nation. How did God work then? As He always does. He has restorative plans that are always set in motion. Only when resistance is irrevocable, does mercy cease.

“God pities men struggling in the blindness of perversity; He seeks to enlighten the darkened understanding by sending *reproofs* and *threatenings* designed to cause the most exalted to feel their ignorance and to deplore their errors. He endeavors to help the self-complacent to become *dissatisfied with their vain attainments* and to seek for spiritual blessing through a close connection with heaven.”[7]

The Book of Revelation follows a similar template, warning of danger. Only this time it is a final prophetic omen of God’s last acts in this period of mercy before terminal justice is activated. Putting the messages of that book into the archives of history as so many scholars do deprives the last generation of insight into God’s last Jeremiah call. It is then that He permits mercy to wane and justice to rise. There will be no turning back.

As the beginning of the fall feasts of ancient Israel was a calling and warning that the “end” (Day of Atonement) was coming, Revelation is a call that the final day of mercy is about to close. Jesus – the Lamb – opens the Seals one by one. End-time events occur with the breaking of each Seal. At the second and fifth Seals, God’s messengers are persecuted and even killed!

Then God acts in Trumpet judgments, and at the sixth Seal begins to show His final desolating response to man’s rebellious acts. An earthquake so severe occurs it moves mountains and islands. Celestial signs of a supernatural character begin. The wicked are terrorized and know God is acting. “Hide us from His face,” they cry, and “from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of his wrath is come” (Revelation 6:16-17).

God’s wrath, relating to the end of time, has several expressions. The time of the seven Vials is the greatest and most devastating. Under the sixth Seal, the *only* natural destruction involves an earthquake. The celestial signs are terror producing, but no devastation is described as coming from them. The earthquake is worldwide and severe enough to move the mountains and cause islands to vanish (Revelation 16:

20 ; cf. 6:14). That “wrath of God” noted is fully identified by the wicked as the day of His wrath. That is, not God declared.

“Howl ye; for the day of the LORD [is] at hand; it shall come as a destruction from the Almighty. Therefore shall all hands be faint, and every man's heart shall melt: And they shall be afraid: pangs and sorrows shall take hold of them; they shall be in pain as a woman that travaileth: they shall be amazed one at another; their faces [shall be as] flames. Behold, the day of the LORD cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and

he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it. For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine. And I will punish the world for [their] evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; and I will cause the arrogance of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible” (Isaiah 13:6-11).

To ferret out the distinctive time and events at the end requires a strict adherence to the context of the prophecy and attention to detail in the structure. Revelation 6 is pre-executive judgment language.

“From the broad perspective of Scripture, the day of the Lord will be a time when God’s wrath puts extended pressure on His enemies (Isaiah 3:16-24, 13:9-11, Jeremiah 30:7, Ezekiel 38-39, Amos 5:18-19, Zephaniah 1:14-18)... At the outset of the day of the Lord, human trials will be prolonged and comparable to a woman’s labor before giving birth to a child (Isaiah 13:8, 26:17-19; 66:7-9; Jeremiah 30:6-8; Micah 4:9-10; cf. Matthew 24:8, I Thessalonians 5:3). This phase of growing human agony will be climaxed by the Messiah’s personal return to earth to terminate the period of turmoil through direct judgment. Armageddon (Revelation 16: 16 , 19:11 -21) and the series of tribulation visitations that precede it are inseparable parts of the day of the Lord. God’s eschatological wrath is a unit.”[8]

Retributive judgment begins with the first four Trumpets. These are mixed with mercy. The judgment is devastating like the Feast of Trumpets. It is the final call to repentance before probation closes. God’s remnant have not yet been completely sealed in their foreheads. The wicked think the day of God’s wrath has come – but it is only warnings of greater wrath.

“Calamities will come – calamities most awful, most unexpected; and these destructions will follow one after another. If there will be a heeding of the warnings that God has given, and if churches will repent, returning to their allegiance, then other cities may be spared for a time. But if men who have been deceived continue in the same way in which they have been walking, disregarding the law of God and presenting falsehoods before the people, God allows them to suffer calamity, that their senses may be awakened.”[9]

“Long has God delayed His judgments, but now He would visit His displeasure upon them as a last effort to check them in their evil course.”[10]

This describes destructive calamities mingled with mercy – now limited.

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“Strictly will the cities of the nations be dealt with, and yet they will not be visited in the extreme of God's indignation, because some souls will yet break away from the delusions of the enemy, and will repent and be converted, while the mass will be treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath.”[11]

How extensive will this destruction be?

“O that God’s people had a sense of the impending destruction of thousands of cities, now almost given to idolatry.”[12]

“The time is near when large cities will be swept away, and all should be warned of these coming judgments.”[13]

“There are reasons why we should not build in the cities. On these cities, God’s judgments are soon to fall.”[14]

“The time is right upon us when there will be sorrow in the world that no human balm can heal. Even before the last great destruction comes upon the world, the flattering monuments of man’s greatness will be crumbled in the dust. God’s *retributive judgments* will fall on those who in the face of great light have continued in sin. Costly buildings, supposed to be fireproof, are erected. But as Sodom perished in the flames of God's vengeance, so will these proud structures become ashes. I have seen vessels which cost immense sums of money wrestling with the mighty ocean, seeking to breast the angry billows. But with all their treasures of gold and silver, and with all their human freight, they sank into a watery grave.”[15]

This serves to warn of impending judgment on the wicked before probation closes. And many evil men who block the final work of the loud cry, God destroys in these conflagrations so His final work can be completed unimpeded. God’s wrath and vengeance before the last great destruction,” the seven Bowls, serve redemptive purposes.

“While He does not delight in *vengeance*, He will execute judgment upon the transgressors of His law. He is forced to do this, to preserve the inhabitants of the earth from utter depravity and ruin. In order to save some He must cut off those who have become hardened in sin. ‘The Lord is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked.’ Nahum 1:3. By terrible things in righteousness He will vindicate the authority of His downtrodden law. And the very fact of His reluctance to execute justice testifies to the enormity of the sins that call forth His judgments and to the severity of the retribution awaiting the transgressor.”[16]

“Says the prophet Isaiah: ‘The Lord shall rise up as in mount Perazim, he shall be wroth as in the valley of Gibeon, that he may do his work, his strange work, and bring to pass his act, his strange act.’ The work of wrath and destruction is indeed a strange, unwelcome work for Him who is infinite in love.”[17]

When Michael stands up and puts on His robes of vengeance, then wrath without mercy comes upon the inhabitants of earth.

“All the judgments upon men, prior to the close of probation, have been mingled with mercy. The pleading blood of Christ has shielded the sinner from receiving the full measure of his guilt; but in the final judgment, *wrath is poured out unmixed with mercy.*”^[18]

“And I heard a great voice out of the temple saying to the seven angels, Go your ways, and pour out the vials of the wrath of God upon the earth (Revelation 16:1). When Christ ceases His intercession in the sanctuary, the unmingled wrath threatened against those who worship the beast and his image and receive his mark (Revelation 14:9-10), will be poured out. The plagues upon Egypt when God was about to deliver Israel were similar in character to those more terrible and extensive judgments which are to fall upon the world **just before** the final deliverance of God’s people. Says the revelator, in describing those terrific scourges: ‘There fell a noisome and grievous sore upon the men which had the mark of the beast, and upon them which worshipped his image.’ The sea ‘became as the blood of a dead man: and every living soul died in the sea.’ And ‘the rivers and fountains of waters ... became blood.’ Terrible as these inflictions are, God’s justice stands fully vindicated. The angel of God declares: ‘Thou art righteous, O Lord, ... because thou hast judged thus. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink; for they are worthy.’ Revelation 16:2-6. By condemning the people of God to death, they have as truly incurred the guilt of their blood as if it had been shed by their hands.”^[19]

“The world is soon to be left by the angel of mercy, and the seven last plagues are to be poured out. Sin, shame, sorrow, and darkness are on every side; but God still holds out to the souls of men the precious privilege of exchanging darkness for light, error for truth, sin for righteousness. But God’s patience and mercy will not always wait. Let not one soul think that he can hide from God’s wrath behind a lie, for God will strip from the soul the refuge of lies. The bolts of God’s wrath are soon to fall, and when He shall begin to *punish the transgressors*, there will be no period of respite until the end. The storm of *God’s wrath* is gathering, and those only will stand who are sanctified through the truth in the love of God. They shall be hid with Christ in God till the desolation shall be overpast. He shall come forth to punish the inhabitants of the world for their iniquity.”^[20]

Many have presumed that God’s wrath is nothing more than His protective mercy being withdrawn. This reasoning sweeps aside the imagery of angels holding the vials. It also denies the progressive types of calamities which He predicts. That opinion also refutes God’s reactive hatred towards sin. God hates sin, and in mercy, withholds His vengeance to give the sinner every chance to become a saint. His mercy contains His justice for a time.

To those who have cultivated loyalty at all cost, eternal peace and happiness will come. They may experience the trials of dependency here but will eternally bathe in His deeply satisfying love.

Franklin S. Fowler Jr., M.D.
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References (emphases added unless otherwise noted):

- [1] David S. Dockery, "What's Good News – The Gift," *Christianity Today*, Feb. 7, 2000.
- [2] *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 97.
- [3] *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- [4] *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101
- [5] *Prophets and Kings*, p. 429.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p. 432.
- [7] *Prophets and Kings*, p. 435.
- [8] Thomas, Robert L.; *Revelation 1-7 – An Exegetical Commentary*, p. 458-459.
- [9] *Maranatha*, p. 176.
- [10] *Patriarchs and Kings*, p. 425; *Evangelism*, p. 27.
- [11] *Maranatha*, p. 25; *Evangelism*, p. 27.
- [12] *The Review and Herald*, Sept. 10, 1903.
- [13] *Evangelism*, p. 29 (1910).
- [14] *Letter 158*, 1902.
- [15] *Maranatha*, p. 175.
- [16] *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 628.
- [17] *The Signs of the Times*, "A Doomed People," August 24, 1882.
- [18] *The Great Controversy*, p. 628.
- [19] *Maranatha*, p. 267.
- [20] *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 182.