

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

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Pastor/Teacher
Gary L.W. Johnson

SAVED: FROM WHAT? (Part II)

The doctrine of God's wrath, even by people who claim to be Evangelical, is now considered highly inappropriate and down-right offensive. R. C. Sproul observed, "I think the greatest point of unbelief in our culture and in our Church at this juncture in the 20th century is an unbelief in the wrath of God and the certain promises of judgment for the human race."¹ You cannot read the Bible without encountering the theme of God's wrath. In fact, this is a major theme in Scripture. Note the following texts:

Psalm 2:1-5, 12a – "Why do the nations rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against His anointed, saying, Let us break their bonds asunder, and cast away their cords from us. He who sitteth in the heavens shall laugh; the LORD shall have them in derision. Then shall He speak unto them in His wrath, and vex them in His great displeasure....Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and ye perish from the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little...."

Psalm 76:6-9a – "At Thy rebuke, O God of Jacob, both the chariot and horse are cast into a dead sleep. Thou, even Thou, art to be feared. And who may stand in Thy sight when once Thou art angry? Thou didst cause judgment to be heard from heaven; the earth feared, and was still, when God arose to judgment...."

Psalm 90:7, 11 – "For we are consumed by Thine anger, and by Thy wrath are we troubled....Who knoweth the power of Thine anger? Even according to Thy fear, so is Thy wrath."

Isaiah 9:19a – "Through the wrath of the LORD of hosts is the land darkened, and the people shall be as the fuel of the fire...."

Jeremiah 7:20 – "Therefore, thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, Mine anger and My fury shall be poured out upon this place, upon man, and upon beast, and upon the trees of the field, and upon the fruit of the ground; and it shall burn, and shall not be quenched."

Ezekiel 7:19b – "...Their silver and their gold shall not be able to deliver them in the day of the wrath of the LORD; they shall not satisfy their souls, neither fill their stomachs, because it is the stumbling block of their iniquity."

John 3:36 – "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him."

Romans 9:22 – "What if God, willing to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction."

Ephesians 5:6 – "Let no man deceive you with vain words; for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the sons of disobedience."

II Thessalonians 1:7b-9 -- "...the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power."

Paul specifically links being 'saved' from 'God's wrath' in Romans 5:9 where we read, "Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God". But, increasingly Evangelicals avoid such Biblical themes.

Why? The late Leon Morris noted, “Above everything else, the concept of the wrath of God stresses the seriousness of sin. On the Old Testament view sin is not just a mere peccadillo which a kindly, benevolent God will regard as of no great consequence. On the contrary, the God of the Old Testament is One who loves righteousness (Pss. 33:5; 48:10; *etc.*), and whose attitude to unrighteousness can be described as hatred. ‘These are the things that ye shall do; Speak ye every man the truth with his neighbour; execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates: and let none of you imagine evil in your hearts against his neighbor; and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, saith the Lord’ (Zc. 8:16f.) is a typical statement. And not only does God hate sin, He hates sinners also: ‘The Lord trieth the righteous; but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth. Upon the wicked he shall rain snares; fire and brimstone and burning wind shall be the portion of their cup. For the Lord is righteous; he loveth righteousness,’ *etc.* (Ps. 11:5-7). Such passages reveal the strongest possible repulsion in the face of everything that is evil. It is from the very heart of a God who not only loves His people but also hates evil that there proceeds such pleading as, ‘I sent unto you all my servants the prophets, rising up early and sending them, saying, Oh do not this abominable thing that I hate’ (Je. 44:4). Not surprisingly, we find passages in which those who love God are called upon to exercise the same attitude, ‘O ye that love the Lord, hate evil’ (Ps. 97:10).”² How can we deal with the reality of sin and guilt? Many try to make amends by deluding themselves into thinking that their so-called “good works” or character will more than overset the scales of justice.³ The truth of the matter is very much the opposite. Thomas Adam perceptively wrote, “When we have done all we ever shall do, the very best state we ever shall arrive at, will be so far from meriting a reward, that it will need a pardon.”⁴

I. ISAIAH’S GREAT NEED

The distraught prophet has called a glimpse of the awesome holiness of God and finds himself completely shattered by the vision. “He must die, because the holiness of God is to the sinner a consuming fire (chap. 33:14); and the infinite distance between the creature and the Creator is sufficient of itself to produce a prostrating effect, which even the seraphim could not resist without veiling their faces. Isaiah therefore regarded himself as lost.”⁵

- A. A Merciful God. We have highlighted the central themes of God’s holiness and glory but also embedded in this passage is the message of God’s mercy. The noted British preacher G. Campbell-Morgan has eloquently captured this. “Do you hear the thunder of the seraphim as they sing? Can you hear anything else? I do not think I can. God can! What did He hear? The cry of a guilty man! Oh, soul of mine, take heart. One guilty man cries out in the consciousness of his sin, and the faint cry of that human soul, conscious of pollution, rises in the ear of God above the thunder of the seraphim. And a seraph must leave the place of worship to work when a human soul is in need.”⁶
- B. Atonement. People erroneously think that forgiveness with God is automatic or simply granted when asked for. The language of the Bible tells otherwise. Sin or iniquity must be *taken away* or removed before a holy God can forgive. In other words, atonement must be made and atonement speaks of sacrifice.⁷ “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22).
- C. Symbols and Signs. The altar and the stone underscore the significance of sacrifice. The fire likewise points in this direction. “The fire symbolized forgiveness and cleansing. The actual cleansing was accomplished by an offering upon the altar. The touching of the lips does not signify prophetic inspiration, nor may we assume that the seraph of himself could take the initiative toward the forgiveness of sins.”⁸ Calvin has astutely commented on the sacramental nature of this passage. “Here the angel administered the cleansing, but was not the author of it; so that we must not ascribe to another what belongs to God alone. This is expressly stated by the angel himself, who claims nothing as his own, but

bringing forward the sacred pledge which he had received from God, laid it as a sacrament on the *lips* of the Prophet; not that he could not be cleansed without the *coal*, but because the visible sign was useful for the confirmation and proof of the fact. And such is the use of sacraments, to strengthen us in proportion to our ignorance; for we are not angels, that can behold the mysteries of God without any assistance, and therefore he raises us to himself by gradual advances.”⁹

CONCLUSION: “The gospel,” declares Hendriksen, “*saves*. It is the power of God ‘for salvation.’ And what is salvation? What does *to save* mean? In Paul’s writings it means:

NEGATIVELY

To rescue men from sin’s:

- a. guilt (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14)
- b. pollution (Rom. 6:6, 17; 7:21-25a)
- c. slavery (Rom. 7:24, 25; Gal. 5:1)
- d. punishment:
 - (1) alienation from God (Eph. 2:12)
 - (2) the wrath of God (Eph. 2:3)
 - (3) everlasting death (Eph. 2:5, 6)

POSITIVELY

to bring men into the state of:

- a. righteousness (Rom. 3:21-26; 5:1)
- b. holiness (Rom. 6:1-4; 12:1, 2)
- c. freedom (Gal. 5:1; II Cor. 3:17)
- d. blessedness:
 - (1) fellowship with God (Eph. 2:13)
 - (2) the love of God “shed abroad” in The heart (Rom. 5:5)
 - (3) everlasting life (Eph. 2:1, 5; Col. 3:1-4)

Note that over against each evil stands a corresponding blessing. To be saved, then, means to be emancipated from the greatest evil, and to be placed in possession of the greatest good. The promised blessings pertain to the past, present, and never-ending future. Justification, sanctification, and glorification are all included. The state of salvation is opposed to the state of “perishing” or being “lost.” Cf. Luke 19:10; John 3:16. ‘...to everyone,’ regardless, therefore, of race, nationality, age, sex, social rank, degree of education or culture, etc. cf. Isa. 45:22; John 4:42; I Tim. 1:15. But note the significant qualification ‘(to everyone) *who exercises faith*.’ Cf. John 3:16.”¹⁰

As fallen human beings, we stand guilty before a holy God. Our sin has left us not only guilty but polluted, so that when we become *sensible* to our condition, we cry the kind of language expressed in the liturgy of the French Protestant Church: “O Lord God! Eternal and Almighty Father! We confess before thy Divine Majesty that we are miserable sinners, born in corruption and iniquity, prone to evil, and of ourselves incapable of any good. We acknowledge that we transgress in various ways thy holy commandments, so that we draw down on ourselves through thy righteous judgment, condemnation and death.” This sense of shame and self-judgement is combined with confidence in the mercy of God displayed exclusively in the atoning sacrifice of Christ, and this brings peace (Romans 5:1, 2).

ENDNOTES

¹ R. C. Sproul, “Brother, Are You Saved?” Modern Reformation (Mar/Apr. 1996) p. 12.

² L. Morris, The Apostolic Preaching of The Cross (Eerdmans, 1965) p. 174.

³ “Thousands, and ten thousands carve out and dispose of the mercy of god at their own pleasure, write their own pardons, in what terms they think fit, and if they had God’s seal to confirm and ratify them, it were all well; but, alas! It is but a night-vision, a dream of their own brain.” The Works of John Flavel III (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), p. 201.

⁴ T. Adams, Private Thoughts on Religion (Presbyterian Board of Education, 1784), p. 218.

⁵ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Commentary On the Old Testament VII (rpt. Hendrickson, 1996), p. 127.

⁶ G. Campbell-Morgan, The Westminster Pulpit II (Pickering & Inglis, 1934), p. 304.

⁷ “The word KĀPAR, standing at the heart of the Hebrew sacrificial system, reveals that the worshipper felt the need of escaping the divine displeasure at sin. In this respect it appears to have had a basic propitiatory connotation.....It must be carefully noted, however, that the biblical view of propitiation is not characterized by the crude features which attach to most heathen conceptions. Rather it should be viewed as the gracious provision made by God himself whereby the effects of his righteous anger against sin may be averted and the sinner may receive the blessings of his paternal love without infringement on his holiness and moral

government.” R. Nicole, “C.H. Dodd and Propitiation” in The Westminster Theological Journal (vol. SVII, No. 2, May, 1955), p. 152.

⁸ As cited in E. J. Young, The Book of Isaiah I (Eerdmans, 1981), p. 251.

⁹ Calvin’s Commentaries VII (rpt. Baker, 1993), p. 210.

¹⁰ Wm. Hendriksen, Romans: New Testament Commentary (Baker, 1981) p. 60.