

If there's one phrase or concept which confuses and leads well-intentioned Christians astray—and as many other people as they can get their hands on—my vote would be the concept of “the wrath of God.”

I want to explain why “the wrath of God” is your best hope (well, almost—maybe except for Jesus) if you'll give me a few minutes.

One of many challenges which will confront those of you serious about studying some portion of the Scriptures each day is that sooner or later you will come upon what appears to be a very troubling concept—“the wrath of God” (Col 3:6). If we didn't take the Bible seriously, the repeated [~175 times in the Bible!] references to “the wrath of God” wouldn't trouble us so much. We'd just ignore them. The “wrath of God” wouldn't be so bad if the character and nature of God didn't matter. But they do.

One reason we probably bristle when we hear this phrase is that it's often associated with guilt, with judgment, with condemnation—both in the Bible and in our memory. Anyone with any sense, Christian or not, knows you wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of the One who has power to bless you or punish you—especially if you think He might torture you in flames forever and ever. [Wimpy guy, standing in front of St Peter, motorcycle gang member... Do you have the record of that time when I...?].

A robust sense of “the wrath of God” appeals to us because it touches upon our desire both for justice and for order in this world. We are created in the image of God, to be moral beings. We know that wrongdoing deserves to be punished, that this universe is not meaningless. A part of us longs for a Judge, a Police Force over human affairs which is not corrupt. When people explain “the wrath of God” as the justice of God, how they can't wait for God take those evildoers and criminals and give 'em hell, something in us wants to applaud...we want to vote for that divine Sheriff who will keep the thugs behind bars, so the streets are safe for us good folks...for a moment...until it dawns on us all over again that absolute justice is no bargain. Without the mercy and the forgiveness of God, each of us, compared to the perfection of God, would wind up on the wrong end of the bar. Each of us would end up in jail, too. [“For there is no distinction; all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”] [Romans 3:23] [Some think this is exactly what we have, where we are living, in this fallen world: it's the jail into which all us imperfect persons have been sentenced for ongoing rehabilitation.]

Before I go on: what exactly are we talking about when we say “the wrath of God”? In the Scriptures, sometimes this phrase refers simply to the law of consequences. Our choices, our actions, our deeds, carry consequences. The prophets kept trying to remind them: if the covenant people Israel worshiped idols, ignored their defining covenant, rebelled against the One God Yahweh, there were bad consequences. The Assyrians, the Babylonians. Slaughter, Seige, Exile. “You can't fool Mother Nature;” “The law of ‘karma.’”

But further, “the wrath of God” can refer to intentionality from God's side; to God's particular personal dealings with each of us. I love my children Catherine and Matt, so I very much want for them to learn certain behavior, certain principles as they grow up. I want them to mature in healthy, God-ordained ways. If they trust me and obey me, (if they know what's good for them,) they will learn what I want them to learn

with a minimum of resistance. If they don't, it will be a long, traumatic process. (I'm still bigger than they are and they have no car keys yet!) But as long as I'm the Dad, I will keep bringing them back to learn the important lessons, as long as it takes, until I know they "get it." I respect their free will, but I still retain the authority to assign consequences: rewards, penalties, do-overs, chores, TV time, "time-out," more privileges—all sorts of consequences. God loves you even more than I love my children; God wants for us to live as if our life is always yielded over to Christ; as if we are already living in His Home, the Kingdom of Heaven. God has lessons we need to learn; God assigns consequences—welcome rewards and painful reminders.

I don't have to tell you why it's so very important for us to understand this phrase, this concept, clearly. But I will. If the essence of the Christian life is our willingly turning the management of our life (day-to-day and forever) over to the guidance of the Holy Spirit of God—resigning as being God even of our own life, never mind how the world ought to be run—then it makes all the difference how we understand this God and try to relate to this God. If deep down, behind and underlying whatever our words might be we understand God to be mainly a Bully, it will probably make us try to behave better. Of course: if you actually believed God sees every one of your actions, and God punishes and rewards accordingly, you can bet it would affect your behavior.

This may be the bottom line belief for many people, even Christians, but it's not what God is after. (And it may explain why there are so many casual ex-Christians floating around. See what they were taught.) God is after much more than good behavior! Our faith is not primarily about ethics. You can train even white rats thru behavior modification and shocks and treats. God could easily get better short-term behavior out of us if that were His first objective. But it's not! Above all, God longs for loving relationship with you. Just as you do with your husband, your wife, your children, your friends—anyone you care about. God knows, and we try to keep remembering, it's about the relationship. The behavior and the life lived will always reflect the underlying relationship. Where there is love, good ethics follow.

[If you grew up under a harsh or abusive mom or dad, you know the difference between responding out of love and responding out of fear. You very quickly adopt outer behavior which avoids the immediate punishment, but your spiritual and emotional life is shut down right then and there—forever, until you do the work necessary and allow the real God, the Great Physician, to heal the wound and to overcome and get past the pain and the fear. Your behavior is exemplary, for as long as it has to be—who wants to get beat up all the time—but the child of abuse is headed for even more pain later on, since the emphasis has been on an outer coping behavior to avoid punishment rather than on nurturing the inner resources for growth and trust and love necessary for genuinely satisfying relationships.]

[Although it would be nice if each of you enjoyed growing up with loving and responsible parents, as I did, still the fact is that it is very difficult for each one of us, whoever our parents were, to let go and trust God. We study, we agree, we read the Bible, we want to let go and totally obey—and then we slip right back into default mode: "I'm not quite ready just yet to face my pain and reveal myself emotionally to other people;" "I'm not quite ready just yet to tithe;" "I'm not quite ready just yet to commit to more time-consuming disciplines." Believe me, I know—but each of us is struggling to

overcome our basic fear of trust. Had we been raised differently, were we loved differently, it would be far easier now for us to trust in God. Every one of us who didn't have perfect parents, who did not choose perfect friends, who did not marry the perfect spouse, who was not or is not the perfect parent or friend or spouse—every blessed one of us is always playing catch-up, trying to fathom the depths of the love of God from a position of disadvantage.]

It's easy to think of "the wrath of God" as the polar opposite of "the love of God." But there has always been a feeble misunderstanding of love which confuses love with compassion, even niceness. (Compassion is one element of love, to be sure, and love is often compassionate.) Compassion wants other people to be at ease, to be happy. Compassion often gives people what they want, tries to satisfy their desires. Compassion wants to relieve suffering. In its moral tone-deafness, our broader culture has elevated compassion to the highest good. But compassion does not go as far as to want or work toward the long-term growth and fate and destiny of another. Compassion does not necessarily have the eternal perspective in mind, the God-perspective. (If it did, of course, we would call it "love.")

Many people would be happy simply to receive this sort of compassion. It's the highest good many can picture. But God pays us a much higher compliment: God loves us.

God's love has a lot more backbone to it than just compassion. In one image we just heard, "God is like a Refiner's fire." [Malachi 3:3] God's desire for us, now and in the world to come, is for us to keep maturing until we have become "conformed to the image of Christ." Compassion is nice, sure—but God has work to do in you and in me. If compassion gets the job done, I'm sure God is pleased—I just don't suppose it has ever happened. Have you ever learned and grown significantly as a result of ease and pleasure? Me neither.

To be in the crucible of the refiners' fire cannot feel very pleasant, very compassionate, to the metal in there at the time. But then I suppose adulterated metal is content to be impure as it is. The Refiner has a much higher goal for the metal than the metal has for itself. [Would the metal ever willingly turn up the heat in the furnace to the melting point?] But the Refiner sees in the crude, mongrel material purity, wholeness, integrity. Anything less has got to go. It's getting in the way of God's goal for the vessel being refined.

(At this point the metaphor turns silly: gold has no desires or will, one way or the other. But God has created you and me with feelings and free will, with a mind and a heart and a spirit and a body. We are persons. We can choose, we can learn, we can change and allow ourselves to be changed. We can resist. Unlike the gold, God allows you and me to choose our response to our ongoing process of refinement: How long will it take me to learn the lessons I need to learn? How long will I remain content with the double-mindedness, the impurities in my life? Most central, how long will I choose to resist the purposes and the love of God? It's up to me. Life is a very effective teacher, if we get serious about learning. The Holy Spirit is an even more effective Teacher, if we get serious about learning.)

All this to say that God loves you and me with a love greater than compassion, with a refining love which "means business." Make no mistake: "the wrath of God," the

“Refiner’s fire” is not to be rationalized away. We are to wake up and take notice. “The wrath of God” is not about Bambi, not about 4-year olds “playing house.” God wants what’s best for us a lot more than we are usually willing to sit still for. With that in mind, lets’ have another look at “the wrath of God.”

We face this dilemma. Our Bible keeps talking about “the wrath of God,” and we heard about “the wrath of God” in our lesson. [Col 3:1-6] We sense instinctively God is not to be messed with. (We’re not stupid; God has the bigger stick. We all remember, at least subconsciously, when we were the 4-year olds. We know we are still the little ones before God.) But shying away from God, running scared, keeps us away from what we were created for, what we most deeply long for—trusting, intimate relationship with our Creator God thru His Holy Spirit.

The way out of our dilemma? You already know: Jesus the Christ is the Way, the Truth, the Life. I won’t repeat the Christmas morning sermon—though I may repeat something of Mary’s children’s sermon last Sunday. Remember, God became a fish! That is the only “for sure” way the fish will ever know the nature of their loving owner. Our “for sure” way of knowing who God is and what God is like is thru Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

When we want to know what God the Father is like, we look to God the Son, our Lord Jesus. When we want to know how to interpret the Holy Scriptures, the sacred and venerable and holy printed word of God (small “w”) we look to the living Word of God, Jesus the Christ. When we need to resolve our dilemma, and dare to trust in Him yet once again more than we are comfortable in doing, we look to Jesus “in Whom all the promises of God are ‘Yes.’” [2 Cor 2:24]

Jesus shows us the forgiving love of God: all the way to the horror of the cross. Jesus shows us the mercy of God—in each unworthy straggler He befriended and welcomed and healed and whose life He transformed as they came to respond to Him. “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.” [John 8:10]

Jesus also shows us the refining love of God, the loving “wrath of God.” Jesus was more than merely compassionate when He confronted those religious leaders who were leading God’s people astray and loading upon them heavy burdens and teaching them only to fear God and keep their distance from Him—exactly what God does not want. “You hypocrites, you snakes, you blind idiots! How dare You! You call yourself God’s teachers, and play the religion card, but you stink worse than rotting death itself. You move heaven and earth to try to make one convert, and then you turn her into a daughter of hell twice as bad as you are!”

Jesus never stopped loving these hypocrites—that’s exactly why they felt His wrath. Because He *did* love them. They just didn’t love Him back, and so to them the love of God felt like “the wrath of God.” It *was* “the wrath of God”—inseparable from the love of God. (What kind of mother ever praised everything her child did? Never disciplined, never corrected, never taught her child? What kind of father only and always wants his child, above all, to like him? Lousy parents, cowardly parents. Parents whose ignorance and fear far exceeds their courage to be loving parents.)

Did you ever think of “the wrath of God” as your best hope, your guarantee that God is no coward in His love for you? That His fierce and refining love is exactly what you need as you keep growing? That what may feel like His wrath toward you is far

more constant than your own laziness, your own resistance toward Him? That He loves you far more than He fears your displeasure, and He keeps risking what pains Him the most—your turning away, having nothing more to do with Him—rather than to give up on you and quit trying to work in you, get thru to you, and pursue you, perfect you [thru His Spirit] every moment, every day, every year, every century, forever?

Picture a very strong, very courageous Daddy standing sentry at the door of his home. Is he loving or wrathful? It all depends, doesn't it? If you are his 4-year-old daughter, his strength is your salvation, your guarantee, your safety. You are grateful for his "wrath." It all depends: are you inside his House or outside? Are you intending to do good or ill to His family? If you're a 4-year-old neighbor knocking in order to come in to play with your best friend, his daughter, or a neighbor coming to visit his wife who is ill, his love will feel kindly to you. His welcome will be warm. If you're trying to burglarize his home or harm his family, his love is going to strike you as extremely "wrathful," and it's a good thing, too. If it does not, it means he is not loving at all. How you experience His love depends not on him but on *you*.

So with the lesson we heard from Colossians. "If you have been raised with Christ..." Are you a member of the household? Have you accepted His invitation to come Home, to abide in Him? (We never forget: it's not all about this lifetime; this is the warm-up to the life eternal He promises. Important as life and death, this lifetime counts—but the real show, the real hope, the real journey continues and builds forever.) So we heard we are to "put to death," "consider as dead," everything that would separate us from Him. That would keep us out of the fullness of abiding in Him. Our old ways, our intent to come into His home and ignore or violate His love or His loved ones or His principles or His plans—the old ways cannot be admitted; and if we live otherwise, if we test Him, if we don't believe it, we will surely experience His wrath. That is, of course, His love. His fierce protection for His own, for His Way, His home which you are resisting against will feel to you as wrath. It's up to you. The question is never the eternal unyielding love of God—the only question mark is you and your approach. Do you understand? You can always rely on the unyielding love of God, more sure than anything you can ever conjure up or resolve to obey. God's love for you is more sure, more fierce, than your love for yourself.

The *given* is the love of God; the only question mark is you, and me. Will you experience the love of God as His wrath or His compassion—His "severity or His kindness"? as Paul sums it up [Romans 11:22]. It's up to you. Repentance, of course, is our decision, our ongoing decision, to consider our old struggles resisting against God as leading to death; as good as dead; to choose to live for Him and enter into His Home as His obedient family members. His love guarantees anyone else, any attitude else, still needs some refining. It's up to you: the love of God never fails; you choose whether it strikes you as His adamant, even vengeful wrath, or as His gentle kindness. He doesn't change—we need to—or it's going to be a long lifetime, a long future.)

Just as with a human parent. Take Matt and Catherine: if they wanted to struggle against me over every lesson I would teach them, then they would experience my love as wrath. When they obey me, work with me, quit resisting me, they are going to experience my Daddy's love not as wrath but as gentle, rewarding kindness. It's up to them, but I cannot quit being their Daddy, quit trying to teach them.

One final image. I've never been on a surfboard, but we all know how surfing works. I have to tell you it looks like a lot of fun—that graceful, effortless glide in on the powerful motion of the waves.

Think of the waves as the inexorable love of God. They keep coming. The only question mark is whether I'm going to struggle against them or ride with them, on top of them, into shore. I can try to oppose the waves, swim into them, fight against the tide—and a surfer can try to do that as long as I have energy and desire to continue—and the love of God is going to keep smacking me in the face, pushing me back, sending me the message that life is hard and joyless and meaningless. The moment I do a 180—“repent”—is the moment the waves become my friend. (The same love of God, the same sets of waves. Before I came Home, committed my life to God in Christ, His love felt like wrath—like tough going and failure and being slapped down over and over again. For many people, life feels that way).

If ever it feels as if you are living or receiving “the wrath of God,” take heart. Do a 180. Know that “the wrath of God” is the love of God experienced from the wrong side. The “wrath of God” is your best hope.

### **Colossians 3:1-7**

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life.