

God: Divine Attributes and Trinitarianism
Part Three

The Love, Justice, and Wrath of God

Love

Love is something God is. The apostle John concludes that lovelessness on the part of the individual is an indication that one does not know God, "because God is love" (1 John 4:8). Love, therefore, according to Carl Henry, "is not accidental or incidental to God; it is an essential revelation of the divine nature, a fundamental and eternal perfection" (V:341). Simply put, *God is a lover.*

Love is simply the giving by God of himself to his creatures. It is the benevolent disposition or inclination in God that stirs him to bestow benefits both physical and spiritual upon those created in his image (and is thus in this respect synonymous with grace). However, insofar as not all of God's creatures receive and experience his love in precisely the same manner or to the same degree, one cannot speak of "the love of God" without qualification. It seems inescapable, both from Scripture and experience, that we differentiate between the love of God as manifested in *common grace* and the love of God as manifested in *special grace*.

- The love of God as manifested in common grace is the love of God as creator which consists of providential kindness, mercy, and longsuffering. It is an indiscriminate and universal love which constrains to the bestowing of all physical and spiritual benefits short of salvation itself. It is received and experienced by the elect and non-elect alike (see Matt. 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-38).
- The love of God as manifested in special grace is the love of God as savior, which consists of redemption, the efficacy of regenerating grace, and the irrevocable possession of eternal life. It is a discriminate and particular love that leads him to bestow the grace of eternal life in Christ. It is received and experienced by the elect only.

Helpful in this regard is the way D. A. Carson identifies five distinguishable ways in which the Bible speaks of the love of God ("On Distorting the Love of God," *BibSac*, 156 January-March 1999, No. 621, pp. 3-13):

- (1) First is the peculiar love of the Father for the Son (John 3:35; 5:20) and of the Son for the Father (John 14:31).
- (2) Second is God's providential love over all of his creation. Although the word "love" is itself rarely used in this way, there is no escaping the fact that the world is the product of a loving Creator (see the declaration of "good" over what God has made in Gen. 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31).
- (3) Third is God's saving love toward the fallen world (John 3:16).
- (4) Fourth is God's particular, effectual, selecting love for his elect. The elect may be the nation of Israel, or the church, or specific individuals. See esp. Deut. 7:7-8; 10:14-15; Eph. 5:25.
- (5) Fifth is God's love toward his own people in a provisional or conditional way. Often the *experience* of God's love is portrayed as something that is conditioned upon obedience and the fear of God. This doesn't have to do with that love by which we are brought into a saving relationship with God but rather with our capacity to *feel and enjoy* the affection of God. See Jude 21; John 15:9-10; Psalm 103:9-18.

The Principles of Divine Love

1. Like grace, the saving love of God is undeserved. This is but to say that the love of God for sinners, which issues in their salvation, finds no obstacle in their sin. God loves us while we were yet sinners precisely in order that the glory of his love might be supremely magnified. It was when we were still "powerless" that "Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6). Again, Paul stressed that "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8; cf. Deut. 7:6-8). The sole cause of God's saving love for sinners is God Himself!

2. This love of God, then, is clearly the source or cause of the atoning work of Christ. God does not love people because Christ died for them, Christ died for them because God loved them. The death of the Savior is not to be conceived as restoring in people something on the basis of which we might then win God's love. The sacrifice of Christ does not procure God's affection, as if it were necessary, through his sufferings, to extract love from an otherwise stern, unwilling, reluctant Deity. On the contrary, God's love constrains to the death of Christ and is supremely manifested therein. In a word, the saving love of God is giving:

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, *who loved me and gave himself for me*" (Gal. 2:20).

"This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but *that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins*" (1 John 4:9-10).

"For God *so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son*, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as *Christ loved us and gave himself up for us* as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5:1-2).

"Husbands, love your wives, just as *Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*" (Eph. 5:25).

As Carl Henry has noted: "almost invariably the New Testament Epistles expound God's love for us by reference to the cross. To eliminate the death of Christ for sinners would eviscerate the very heart of divine love as portrayed in the New Testament" (VI:355).

3. The saving love of God is also sovereign. John Murray explains as follows:

"Truly God is love. Love is not something adventitious; it is not something that God may choose to be or choose not to be. He is love, and that necessarily, inherently, and eternally. As God is spirit, as he is light, so he is love. Yet it belongs to the very essence of electing love to recognize that it is not inherently necessary to that love which God necessarily and eternally is that he should set such love as issues in redemption and adoption upon utterly undesirable and hell-deserving objects. It was of the free and sovereign good pleasure of his will, a good pleasure that emanated from the depths of his own goodness, that he chose a people to be heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ. The reason resides wholly in himself and proceeds from determinations that are peculiarly his as the 'I am that I am'" (RAA, 10).

A. W. Pink concurs. Concerning the statement, "Jacob have I loved but Esau have I hated," he writes: There was no more reason in Jacob why he should be the object of Divine love, than there was in Esau. They both had the same parents, and were born at the same time, being twins [neither one had done anything good or evil]: yet God loved the one and hated the other! Why? Because it pleased Him to do so" (93).

Thus, to say that love is sovereign is to say it is distinguishing. It is, by definition as saving love, bestowed upon and experienced by those only who are in fact saved (i.e., the elect). Although there is surely a sense in which God loves the non-elect, he does not love them redemptively. If he did, they would certainly be redeemed. God loves them, but not savingly, else they would certainly be saved. All this is but to say that God's eternal, electing love is not universal but particular.

4. It is also to the saving love of God that we trace the cause of our predestination. Paul writes:

"For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (Rom. 8:29).

Although God certainly foresees all that comes to pass, more than bare foresight is envisioned here. The foreknowledge of which Paul speaks in Romans 8:29 is distinguishing, not universal: it is a foreknowledge of those

and those only who are in turn predestined, called, justified, and glorified. But what precisely does it mean? Murray explains:

"Many times in Scripture 'know' has a pregnant meaning which goes beyond that of mere cognition. It is used in a sense practically synonymous with love, to set regard upon, to know with peculiar interest, delight, affection, and action (of. Gen. 18:19; Exod. 2:25; Psalm 1:6; 144:3; Jer. 1:5; Amos 3:2; Hosea 13:5; Matt. 7:23; I Cor. 8:3; Gal. 4:9; II Tim. 2:19; I John 3:1). There is no reason why this import of the word 'know' should not be applied to 'foreknow' in this passage, as also in 11:2 where it also occurs in the same kind of construction and where the thought of election is patently present (cf. 11: 5, 6). When this import is appreciated, then there is no reason for adding any qualifying notion and 'whom he foreknew' is seen to contain within itself the differentiating element required. It means 'whom he set regard upon' or 'whom he knew from eternity with distinguishing affection and delight' and is virtually equivalent to 'whom he foreloved'" (I:317).

It is, therefore, God's eternal and distinguishing love, conditioned upon no other grounds than his own sovereign and immutable purpose, that explains and accounts for our predestination unto conformity to Christ.

5. This same love of God is the reason for our adoption as sons. It was "in love" that God "predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance [not with our foreseen faith but in accordance] with his pleasure and will" (Eph. 1:4b-5). It is because God loved that he predestinated. "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us," John understandably exclaims, "that we should be called children of God" (1 John 3:1)!

6. We should not in the least be surprised that this love of God is described as "great." It was because of his "*great* love for us" that God made us alive together with Christ. It is a great love because it can never be exhausted, its depths never plumbed, its purpose never thwarted by the sin of man (Eph. 2:4-5). And again, the context will not permit this love to be universalized. This is not to say that God does not "love" in any sense those who are never saved (i.e., made spiritually alive and raised up with Christ). It is simply to say that only those who are, in fact, saved are especially God's "beloved" and the objects of a divine affection that actually issues in their being saved.

7. The saving love of God is eternal. It was "before the creation of the world" (Eph. 1:4-5) that he chose us in Christ and predestined us unto adoption as sons (cf. 2 Thess. 2:13). Charles Spurgeon describes this *eternal* love:

"In the very beginning, when this great universe lay in the mind of God, like unborn forests in the acorn cup; long ere the echoes awoke the solitudes; before the mountains were brought forth; and long ere the light flashed through the sky, God loved His chosen creatures. Before there was any created being; when the ether was not fanned by an angel's wing, when space itself had not an existence, where there was nothing save God alone — even then, in that loneliness of Deity, and in that deep quiet and profundity, His bowels moved with love for His chosen. Their names were written on His heart, and then were they dear to His soul. Jesus loved His people before the foundation of the world — even from eternity! and when He called me by His grace, He said to me, 'I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee'" (I:167).

8. This love is not only eternal in its conception, it is *irrevocable* in its purpose. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" (Rom. 8:35). Nothing, Paul insists and assures, shall be able to separate us from the love of Christ. That alone can sever us from the embrace of God's love which is greater than God. Hence we rest secure.

9. In Romans 5, Paul can speak of a confident hope on no other ground than that God has loved us in Christ. It is because he loved us when we were yet his enemies, a love demonstrated by the sending of his Son, that his love for us now that we are his friends is unshakeable. This "much more" argument of Romans 5:8-11 is encouragement indeed. Paul says, in effect, that if when we were alienated from God, he, notwithstanding, reconciled us to himself through his Son, how much more, now that we have been graciously instated in his favor and the alienation removed, shall the exalted and everlasting life of Christ insure our being saved to the uttermost! Murray comments: "It would be a violation of the wisdom, goodness, and faithfulness of God to suppose that he would have done the greater [love His enemies] and fail in the lesser [love His friends]" (I:175).

10. Discipline, no less than life, is a product of the divine love: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son" (Heb. 12:5b-6).

The Hebrew Christians to whom these words were addressed had mistakenly come to think that the absence of affliction was a sign of God's special favor and, therefore, that suffering and oppression were an indication of his displeasure. On the contrary, so far from being a proof of God's anger or rejection of us, afflictions are evidence of his fatherly love. Discipline, writes Philip Hughes, "is the mark not of a harsh and heartless father but of a father who is deeply and lovingly concerned for the well-being of his son" (528).

11. The eternal and irrevocable love which God has for his people also secures far more than merely the reconciliation of estranged sinners. This manifold design of God's saving love is especially evident in John's first epistle. For example, the love that God has for us is said to make possible our love for one another. Following his discussion of God's love as witnessed in the atoning sacrifice of his Son (1 John 4:7-11), John writes: "No one has ever seen God; but if we love each other, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us". (1 John 4:12).

Other texts of Scripture confirm that God has never been seen (cf. 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16; Exod. 33:20). How, then, can he be known? In John 1:18 the answer is given: "No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known."

This is all well and good, but for what purpose does John include it in this context? Evidently, according to John Stott, he wishes to say that the unseen God, revealed once in his Son, "is now revealed in his people if and when they love one another. God's love is seen in their love because their love is his love imparted to them by his Spirit" (164). The point is *that although God cannot be seen in himself he can be seen in those in whom he abides when they love others with that very love wherewith they were loved!* The fullness of God's redemptive love for us in Christ thus attains its intended goal in our love for one another.

This notion that God's love has for its ultimate design more than the salvation of those on whom it is showered is seen yet again in 1 John 2:5. Here we read that "if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him." That is to say, the love of God achieves its ordained purpose when we as the recipients of it in turn obey him from whom it has come forth.

Consider 1 John 4:17. "Love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him." Once more, God's love secures its end to the degree that we who are its objects cease to fear the day of judgment. The knowledge of God's fatherly love should forever dispel any apprehension of standing in his presence. This is not presumption, but a Spirit-induced conviction that God's love has efficaciously and eternally provided for us in Christ that righteousness on the basis of which we are delivered from all penal liability. God's perfect love for us, when rightly perceived, does indeed cast out fear!

12. No wonder, then, in light of what we have seen, that Paul speaks of the love of God as *incomprehensible!* And yet he prays specifically that we might know this love that "surpasses knowledge" (Eph. 3:19).

Justice

When we speak about the *justice* of God, we have in mind the idea that God always acts in perfect conformity and harmony with his own character. Some suggest that justice is thus a synonym for *righteousness*. Whatever God is, says, or does, by virtue of the fact that it is *God*, makes it righteous. Right and wrong are simply, and respectively, what God either commands or forbids. In other words, God doesn't do or command something because it is right. It is right because it is done or commanded by God. Righteousness or rectitude or good do not exist independently of God as a law or rule or standard to which God adheres or conforms. Rather, righteousness or rectitude or good are simply *God acting and speaking*.

Justice, therefore, is God acting and speaking in conformity with who he is. To say that God is *just* is to say that he acts and speaks consistently with whatever his righteous nature requires. To be *unjust* is to act and speak inconsistently with whatever his righteous nature requires. That, of course, is a contradiction. That would be to assert that the righteous God acts unrighteously. By definition, that is impossible.

Our primary concern here is with what has been called the *retributive justice* of God, or that which God's nature requires him to require of his creatures. Retributive justice is that in virtue of which God gives to each of us that which is our due. It is that in virtue of which God treats us according to our deserts. Retributive justice is thus somewhat synonymous with *punishment*. This is a *necessary* expression of God's reaction to sin and evil. Retributive justice is not something which God may or may not exercise, as is the case with mercy, love, and grace. Retributive justice, i.e., punishment for sin, is a matter of *debt*. It is something from which God cannot refrain doing lest he violate the rectitude and righteousness of his nature and will. **Sin must be punished.** It is a serious misunderstanding of Christianity and the nature of forgiveness to say that believers are those whose guilt is rescinded and whose sins are not punished. Our guilt and sin were fully imputed to our substitute, Jesus, who suffered the retributive justice in our stead.

An excellent illustration of this principle is found in Psalm 103:10. I have defined *retributive justice* as that in God's nature which requires him to deal with us according to our sins and reward us according to our iniquities. But in Ps. 103:10 we are told that God "**has NOT dealt with us according to our sins, NOR rewarded us according to our iniquities!**" Indeed, according to v. 12, we are told that "as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us." Does this mean, then, that God has simply ignored the righteous requirements of his nature, that he has dismissed or set aside the dictates of divine justice? Certainly not. See Romans 3:21-26. All sin is punished, either in the person of the sinner or in the person of his/her substitute. God's retributive justice was satisfied for us in the person of Christ, who endured the full measure of punishment which the justice and righteousness of God required.

That attribute in God's character that expresses itself in retributive justice is also called *wrath*.

Wrath

A. *The reality of wrath* (Nahum 1:2-3a,6-8)

The doctrine or concept of *wrath* is thought by many to be beneath God. C. H. Dodd, for example, speaks for many when he says that the notion of divine wrath is *archaic* and that the biblical terminology refers to no more than "an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe." In other words, for such as Dodd, divine wrath is an impersonal force operative in a moral universe, not a personal attribute or disposition in the character of God. Wrath may well be ordained and controlled by God, but is clearly no part of him, as are love, mercy, kindness, etc.

Clearly, Dodd and others misunderstand divine wrath. It is not the loss of self-control or the irrational and capricious outburst of anger. But divine wrath is not to be thought of as a celestial bad temper or God lashing out at those who "rub Him the wrong way." Divine wrath is *righteous antagonism toward all that is unholy. It is the revulsion of God's character to that which is a violation of God's will.* Indeed, one may speak of *divine wrath* as a function of *divine love!* For God's wrath is His love for holiness and truth and justice. It is because God passionately loves purity and peace and perfection that He reacts angrily toward anything and anyone who defiles them. J. I. Packer explains:

"Would a God who took as much pleasure in evil as He did in good be a good God? Would a God who did not react adversely to evil in His world be morally perfect? Surely not. But it is precisely this adverse reaction to evil, which is a necessary part of moral perfection, that the Bible has in view when it speaks of God's wrath" (*Knowing God*, 136-37).

Leon Morris agrees:

"Then, too, unless we give a real content to the wrath of God, unless we hold that men really deserve to have God visit upon them the painful consequences of their wrongdoing, we empty God's forgiveness of its meaning. For if there is no ill desert, God ought to overlook sin. We can think of forgiveness as something real only when we hold that sin has betrayed us into a situation where we deserve to have God inflict upon us the most serious consequences, and that is upon such a situation that God's grace supervenes. When the logic of the situation demands that He should take action against the sinner, and He yet takes action for him, then and then alone can we speak of grace. But there is no room for grace if there is no suggestion of dire consequences merited by sin" (*The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 185).

B. *The vocabulary of wrath*

a. **thumos** - is a word derived from *thuo* which originally meant "a violent movement of air, water, the ground, animals, or men" (TDNT, III:167). It came to signify the panting rage which wells up in a man's body and spirit. Thus *thumos* came to mean passionate anger, arising and subsiding quickly. It occurs twice in Luke, five times in Paul, once in Hebrews, and ten times in Revelation. Outside of Revelation it is used for God's wrath only once (Rom. 2:8). In Revelation it refers to God's wrath seven times, six of which have the qualifying phrase "of God" (14:10,19; 15:1,7; 16:1; 19:15).

b. **orge** - is a word much more suited to a description of God's wrath in the NT. It is derived from *orgao*, which speaks of "growing ripe" for something or "getting ready to bear". It thus gave *orge* the meaning of a settled disposition or emotion arising out of God's nature. It is specifically said to be "of God" in John 3:36 (on the lips of Jesus); Rom. 1:18; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6; Rev. 19:15. We read of the "wrath of the Lamb" in Rev. 6:16. See also Rev. 6:17; 11:18; 14:10; 16:19.

See esp. Rev. 19:15 where John speaks of "the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty," where "fierce" is a translation of *thumos* and "wrath" is a translation of *orge*.

C. *The present revelation of wrath*

We read in Romans 1:18 that God's wrath *is being* revealed (present tense). Where or how? Options: 1) a futuristic present, hence referring to the final judgment; 2) the disease and disasters of earthly life; 3) given the parallel with v. 17 some have argued that just as the *righteousness* of God is revealed in the gospel so too is the *wrath* of God (i.e., the gospel is the proclamation of both grace and judgment, mercy and wrath); or more probably 4) God's wrath is revealed in the content of vv. 24-32. I.e., "the wrath of God is now visible in His abandonment of humanity to its chosen way of sin and all its consequences" (Moo, 96).

"The wrath which is being revealed," writes Cranfield, "is no nightmare of an indiscriminate, uncontrolled, irrational fury, but the wrath of the holy and merciful God called forth by, and directed against" men's ungodliness (sin is an attack on God's majesty) and unrighteousness (sin is a violation of God's will) (111).

D. *The future revelation of wrath*

See Romans 5:9; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6; 2 Thess. 1:10; Rev. 14:9-12.

Discussion Questions

(1) Does God "love" all of humanity in precisely the same way, to the same degree? Defend your answer from Scripture.

(2) Is God "free" or "sovereign" when it comes to the expression of his love, or must he love everyone equally and in the same way for him to be fair and just and good?

(3) Must sin be punished? If so, why? Why is God not free to suspend judgment? Or is he? And if he is, why doesn't he?

(4) Is "wrath" a personal attribute of God, something inherent in his character? Or is it in some sense an impersonal "law" in a moral universe?

(5) How would you respond to someone who insisted that the idea of "wrath" is beneath God's dignity and unworthy of a God of love and kindness?