The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God

R.V.G. Tasker

This is the first part of a lecture that was given in Cambridge for the Tyndale Fellowship in 1951. At that time R.V.G. Tasker was Professor of New Testament Exegesis in the University of London. Part two will be published in Themelios 26.3.

Preface

In this lecture I have endeavoured to draw attention to some of the Biblical evidence, present in both the Old and New Testaments, which reveals God as a God of wrath as well as a God of love. It is an axiom of the Bible that there is no incompatibility between these two attributes of the divine nature; indeed for the most part the great Christian theologians and preachers of the past have endeavoured to be loyal to both sides of the divine self-disclosure. In more recent years, however, there has been widespread neglect and indeed denial of the doctrine of the divine wrath; and emphasis has been placed almost exclusively upon the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. In consequence the severity of Biblical Christianity has largely been lost sight of, with far-reaching and disastrous results in many spheres of life, as Dr D.M. Lloyd Jones in his book The Plight of Men and the Power of God has clearly shown. It is surely time that the balance was redressed, and that a generation which has little or no fear of God should be faced with the reality of his wrath as well as with his loving-kindness.

The so-called ‘moral’ objection to the doctrine of the divine wrath has no substance when it is realised that the Bible, containing as it does a revelation of God to man, must use the language of the human emotions in speaking of God; but that, just because God is God and not man, divine love transcends human love, and divine wrath transcends human wrath. There is in the love of God none of the fickleness, the waywardness, and the weakness of human love; and these features are also absent from his wrath. But just as human love is deficient if the element of anger is entirely lacking (for as Lactantius wrote in the third century, qui non ebit diligentiam too is anger an essential element of divine love. God’s love is inseparably connected with his holiness and his justice. He must therefore manifest anger when confronted with sin and evil.

The doctrine of the wrath of God safeguards the essential distinction between Creator and creature, which sin is ever seeking to minimise or obliterate. Without a realisation of this wrath we are unlikely to have that ‘fear of God which is the beginning of wisdom’. It is with a consciousness of this truth, and with a desire to be faithful to the biblical revelation as a whole, that I offer this study as a contribution to the series of Tyndale Lectures.

Introduction

Our investigation into the Biblical doctrine of the wrath of God should, I suggest, begin with a careful exegesis of Romans 1:18. In this verse the apostle writes, ‘for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold down the truth in unrighteousness’. The main points at issue in the interpretation of these words are, first, whether the sentence is co-ordinate with the previous sentence; and, secondly, what is the exact significance of the present tense ‘is revealed’. On the supposition that the two sentences are co-ordinate, verse 18 would supply another reason why Paul is ‘not ashamed of the gospel’. He is unashamed, because in it a revelation is made not only of the righteousness but also of the wrath of God. In favour of this view, it has been suggested that the form of the two sentences suggests parallelism; and that, on the assumption that it is in the gospel alone that God’s wrath is adequately revealed, there is no contradiction between 1:18 and the further statement of the apostle in 3:25 that ‘God set forth [Jesus] to be a propitiation, ... because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime, in the forbearance of God’. The revisers were almost certainly right in translating da ien poresin in this verse, ‘because of passing over of sins’ and not, as the AV (following the Vulgate propere remissionem) translated, ‘for the remission of sins’, i.e. ‘in order to bring about the remission of sins’; for although the word poresis is used once in secular literature for the remission of debts, there is no evidence that it is a synonym for aphesis. In the light of the RV translation of Romans 3:25, it is accordingly urged that in Romans 1:18 also the apostle is saying that before the redemptive activity of Christ there was no full expression of God’s wrath. In other words the peculiar characteristic of the whole pre-Christian era was that God in his forbearance tended to overlook the transgressions of men and not to inflict on them the full punishment that they merited. But because he is absolutely righteous such a poresis hamartemainaén could not be permanent. Sooner or later it was inevitable that he should manifest to the full his divine wrath, particularly as many were misunderstanding the nature and purpose of his forbearance, and were fondly supposing that such a one as themselves (Ps. 1:21), - an easy-going God, who would forgive their offences and so remit them. Hence it was necessary, ‘because God had passed over the sins done aforetime’, to show his righteousness by ‘setting forth Jesus to be a propitiation’: and it is this truth, so it is alleged, which is also presented in the apostle’s words in 1:18.

Such an interpretation of 1:18 is also said to be consistent with two statements found in addresses delivered by Paul before pagan audiences: the first at Lystra, in Acts 14:16, that God ‘in the generations gone by suffered all the nations to walk in their own ways; and the second at Athens, in Acts 17:30, that ‘the times of ignorance therefore God overlooked’. It is also said that in

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Paul adds in Romans 1:18 that this revelation of the divine wrath is made ‘from heaven’. He does so perhaps not merely to emphasise still more strongly that this wrath is divine in origin and in character; but also, as Calvin suggested, because it is universal in its scope, for ‘so far and wide as are the heavens, is the wrath of God poured out on the whole world’. C. Hodge, in his commentary on Romans, also pertinently suggested that Paul added these words, ‘because like the lightning from heaven God’s wrath forces itself on the most reluctant vision’. Men may be deaf to the divine voice speaking within them in conscience, but they find it difficult to escape that same voice when it calls to them through the providential ‘chances and changes’ of their experience.

Paul also adds that this revelation is ‘against all unrighteousness of men who hold down the truth in unrighteousness’. The words translated ‘unrighteousness’ aserbeta and adikia, are not synonyms. Rather does the apostle show, by the choice of these particular words and by the order in which he places them, that adikia, human injustice, marks unrighteous culture, and the unnatural and worse than bestial behaviour to which he often sinks has its deepest roots in aserbeta, in his failure to give to God the honour and the reverence which the all-sovereign Creator has the right to demand from his creatures. The sin which permanently evokes God’s wrath, because it is the root of all other sins, is the wilful suppression of such truth about himself as he has been pleased to reveal to men, and of which they can never plead ignorance.

The truth about the divine nature, which is available to all men through the evidence of God’s created works, is necessarily more limited and circumscribed than the special revelation which he has chosen to make through the particular people whom he called to receive it. It is a revelation of his sovereignty and his creative power rather than of his mercy and his saving grace. We may therefore find it helpful as an aid to handling in a necessarily limited way the large amount of Biblical material relevant to our subject, to consider first the manifestation of the divine wrath to those who are outside the covenant relationship, which God established with his people Israel; then to notice the particular forms which such manifestation took, and the causes which gave rise to them, when God directed his anger to his chosen people; and finally to consider how the divine wrath is revealed in Jesus Christ; under the new covenant which he inaugurated; and on the final Day of Wrath.

The Manifestation of the Divine Wrath to Those Outside the Covenant

The locus classicus in Scripture for the manifestation of the divine wrath to the heathen world is Romans 1:19–32. Here Paul insists that the non-Jewish world cannot offer the excuse that it has no knowledge of God because it has not been favoured with the special revelation granted to Israel, and that therefore it is quite undeservedly the object of his wrath. For, though invisible to the eye of man, God has manifested through his created works ‘his everlasting power and divinity’. It is evident, in other words, that the power which made the sun, the moon and the stars is an eternal power possessing the qualities of perfection and deity. In a real
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The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the earthly Paradise led directly, in the Genesis story, to that succession of evils which, Paul enumerates as characteristic of human life in Romans 1:29 and 30. Special attention is drawn in this record of the earliest days of human existence to the destructive nature of sin in the murder of Abel by Cain, the first of many Biblical illustrations of the truth that 'the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God' (1 Cor. 1:19): to the inherent restlessness of man as he becomes 'a fugitive and a wanderer over the face of the earth; and to the incestuous marriage of 'the sons of God and the daughters of men', a violation of the order of creation which God had established which resulted in wickedness so great that 'God repented that he had made man upon the earth', and was moved to destroy by water the whole race of men with the exception of Noah and seven others. In the Biblical perspective this is the most significant example of the divine wrath in the pre-Christian era: it is a manifestation of the judgement of God so outstanding that it has no parallel except the judgement which God will pass upon sinners on the final 'day of his wrath'. Not merely does the second Epistle of Peter draw attention to this parallel in the words 'the world that was, being overflowed with water perished; but the heavens that now are, and the earth ... have been stored up for fire, being reserved against the day of judgements and destruction of ungodly men' (2 Pet. 3:6-7), but the Son of God himself places these two judgements side by side when he says: 'As were the days of Noah, so shall be the coming of the Son of Man' (Matt. 24:37).

In the mercy of God a new beginning seemed possible for mankind after the salvation of Noah and his family; and it is probable that Scripture implies that Noah made known to his contemporaries a fresh revelation of the sovereign justice of God. For he is described in 2 Peter 2:5 as 'a preacher of righteousness'. But the inherent pride of man led him once again to forget his creaturely estate and to seek to obliterate the distance between heaven and earth. I.e. between God and himself, by the erection of the tower of Babel. Trading upon the mercy of God revealed in the salvation from the flood, men succeeded only in evoking a fresh expression of the divine wrath, which resulted in the confusion of human speech and in the rise of the numerous languages which have caused so much misunderstanding and been such a divisive factor in human life.

It is clear from these opening chapters of Genesis not only that the wrath of God manifests itself especially in the confounding of human pride whenever it asserts itself, and in the inflicting of suffering and death as just punishments; but also that man by sinning is plunged into further sin and into all the misery and distress which sin brings in its train. This is the truth to which Paul gives explicit utterance in the last section of the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, to which we must now return.

The various acts of uncleanness mentioned by the apostle in Romans 1:24-27, some of them the very acts which led to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, 'which the Lord overthrew in his anger and his wrath' (Deut. 29:23), are the effects both of the
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idolatry which brings down upon mankind the wrath of God, and of
the essential corruption of the human heart. Paul speaks in these
verses of God giving men up to 'uncleanness' and to 'vile passions'.
God is therefore directly operative in this process of moral decline,
though he is not responsible for moral evil. We should do well to bear
in mind the comment of Haldane on this difficult passage: 'We must
distinguish', he wrote, 'between man's abandonment by God and the
awful effects of the abandonment. The abandonment proceeded from
divine justice but the effect from the corruption of man, in which
God had no part. The abandonment is a negative act of God, or
rather negation of acting, of which God is absolutely master, since
being under no obligation to confer grace upon any man, he is free
to withhold it as he sees good, so that in this withholding there is no
injustice'. There comes a point at which 'God ceases to strive with
man any longer' (see Gen. 6:3).

The reason why sins of moral uncleanness are given such
prominence in this section of Romans is probably not merely
because they were especially prevalent in the Roman world at the
time when the Epistle was written, but because they are the sins
which are so often directly associated with idolatry. The truth thus
becomes apparent that when man degrades God he also degrades
himself beneath the level of the beasts. The apostle accordingly
states in verse 28, 'Even as they refused to have God in their
knowledge, God gave them up unto a reprobate mind, to do the
things which are not fitting'; which Hodge well paraphrased,
bringing out the play on the Greek words: 'As they did not approve
of God, he gave them over to a mind which no one could approve'.

In the light of the language used in this first chapter of the Epistle
to the Romans it is unsatisfactory to limit the meaning of the 'wrath
of God' in the NT solely to the effects which follow upon sinful
actions. We feel, therefore, the inadequacy of such a statement as
that of Professor C.H. Dodd that 'Paul retains the concept of the
wrath of God' not to describe the attitude of God to man but to
describe the inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral
universe': 'The wrath of God', as has been well said, 'is an effectus
as well as an effect, a quality of the nature of God, an attitude of
the mind of God towards evil'.

Throughout this section of Romans emphasis is laid upon the
essential justice of God's dealings with the heathen. The exhibitions
of his wrath are not arbitrary, for God has no pleasure in the death
of the wicked (Ezek. 33:11), nor are they made for any other purpose
except to vindicate his sovereign rights as Creator. Men have
fully merited the misery which their sin has brought upon them.
'Knowing', Paul states in 1:32, 'the ordinance of God, that they
which practise such things are worthy of death, [they] not only
do the same, but also consent with them that practise them'.
Their conscience, as is made clear in 2:14, though dulled by the
moral corruption into which they have sunk, has not obliterated the

knowledge that they are moral beings with a moral sense: for they
pass moral judgements upon one another, 'their thoughts one
with another accusing or else excusing them'. This is evidence that,
though they have no special revelation of a moral law such as has
been revealed to Israel, they possess by nature a knowledge of the
difference between right and wrong. They are in a real sense a law
unto themselves; in that they show the work of the law [the moral
law] written in their hearts', however much they may fail to act in
accordance with its dictates.

The essential truth of the matter therefore is that though men
possess by nature a moral sense they have in fact not only failed to
gratify God and to act in a manner pleasing to him, but have become
incapable of doing so because of the sin resident in their members.
They are therefore, to use the language of Romans 9:22, 'vessels of
wrath fitted unto destruction'. To this truth witness is again borne by
the apostle in Ephesians 2:3 where he states that he himself and his
fellow-Jewish Christians were, apart from the grace of God received
at their conversion, tekna physet orgés by their very nature the
objects of God's wrath, as were the rest of mankind. There has been
a manifest reluctance on the part of modern commentators to give
this expression its obvious positive meaning. Some indeed, because
of the absence of the word theou after orgés have supposed that Paul
is saying no more than that the Gentiles were liable to violent bursts
of human anger. Such an interpretation would not only strip the
passage of its obvious solemnity, but the words would add little to
the previous clause: and there are several places in the NT where the
word orgé seems to refer to God's wrath even though the word
'God' is not mentioned. Other commentators, who recognise that the
reference is to the divine anger, seem anxious to tone down as much
as possible the meaning of physet. Thus Armitage Robinson
interprets the expression negatively and paraphrases it by words 'in
ourselves', i.e. because we lacked divine grace. But the word physet
should refer to what is innate or ingrained and not to something
which is due to a defect caused by particular conditions or
circumstances. In this passage therefore it draws attention to the
essential constitution of fallen man, which is both the cause of the
evil practices into which he has sunk, and the means by which they
are persistently maintained. Just as by virtue of the original creation
in the image of God men are endowed with moral sense and the gift
of conscience, as Paul has stated in 2:14; so too because of their
fallen nature they are inevitably involved in behaviour which renders
them the objects of the divine wrath. The conclusion therefore is that,
apt from the gospel, all mankind that is engendered of the seed of
Adam is tekna physet orgés. 'God's displeasure', as Knox translates
Ephesians 2:3, 'is their birthright'.

The Manifestation of the Wrath of God Under the Old Covenant

In the last half of the second chapter of the Epistle to the Romans
Paul is concerned to show that the children of Abraham, who in
virtue of their privileges as the chosen people of God were apt to
assume that they had a right to pass judgement on the rest of
Idolatry which brings down upon mankind the wrath of God, and of the essential corruption of the human heart. Paul speaks in these verses of God giving men up to 'uncleanness' and to 'vile passions'. God is therefore directly operative in this process of moral decline, though he is not responsible for moral evil. We should do well to bear in mind the comment of Haldane on this difficult passage 'We must distinguish', he wrote, 'between man's abandonment by God and the awful effects of that abandonment. The abandonment proceeded from divine justice but the effect from the corruption of man in which God had no part. The abandonment is a negative act of God, or rather negation of acting, of which God is absolutely master, since being under no obligation to confer grace upon any man, he is free to withhold it as he sees good, so that in this withholding there is no injustice'. There comes a point at which 'God ceases to strive with man any longer' (see Gen. 6:3).

The reason why sins of moral uncleanness are given such prominence in this section of Romans is probably not merely because they were especially prevalent in the Roman world at the time when the Epistle was written, but because they are the sins which are so often directly associated with idolatry. The truth thus becomes apparent that when man degrades God he also degrades himself beneath the level of the beasts. The apostle accordingly states in verse 28, ‘Even as they refused to have God in their knowledge, God gave them up unto a reprobate mind, to do the things which are not fitting’; which Hodge well paraphrased, bringing out the play on the Greek words: ‘As they did not approve of God, he gave them over to a mind which no one could approve’.

In the light of the language used in this first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans it is unsatisfactory to limit the meaning of the ‘wrath of God’ in the NT solely to the effects which follow upon sinful actions. We feel, therefore, the inadequacy of such a statement as that of Professor C.H. Dodd that ‘Paul retains the concept of “the wrath of God” not to describe the attitude of God to man but to describe the inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe’. ‘The wrath of God’, as has been well said, ‘is an effectus as well as an effectus, a quality of the nature of God, an attitude of the mind of God towards evil’.

Throughout this section of Romans emphasis is laid upon the essential justice of God’s dealings with the heathen. The exhibitions of his wrath are not arbitrary, for God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 33:11), nor are they made for any other purpose except to vindicate his sovereign rights as Creator. Men have fully merited the misery which their sin has brought upon them. ‘Knowing’, Paul states in 1:32, ‘the ordinance of God, that they which practise such things are worthy of death, [they] not only do the same, but also consent with them that practise them’. Their conscience, as is made clear in 2:14, though dulled by the moral corruption into which they have sunk, has not obliterated the knowledge that they are moral beings with a moral sense; for they pass moral judgements upon one another, ‘their thoughts one with another accusing or else excusing them’. This is evident that, though they have no special revelation of a moral law such as has been revealed to Israel, they possess by nature a knowledge of the difference between right and wrong. They are in a real sense ‘a law unto themselves; in that they show the work of the law [the moral law] written in their hearts’, however much they may fail to act in accordance with its dictates.

The essential truth of the matter therefore is that though men possess by nature a moral sense they have in fact not only failed to glorify God and to act in a manner pleasing to him, but have become incapable of doing so because of the sin resident in their members. They are therefore, to use the language of Romans 9:22, ‘vessels of wrath fitted unto destruction’. To this truth witness is again borne by the apostle in Ephesians 2:3 where he states that he himself and his fellow-Jewish Christians were, apart from the grace of God received at their conversion, tekna phuset orgēs by their very nature the objects of God’s wrath, as were the rest of mankind. There has been a manifest reluctance on the part of modern commentators to give this expression its obvious positive meaning. Some indeed, because of the absence of the word theou after orgē have supposed that Paul is saying no more than that the Gentiles were liable to violent bursts of human anger. Such an interpretation would not only strip the passage of its obvious solemnity, but the words would add little to the previous clause; and there are several places in the NT where the word orgē seems to refer to God’s wrath even though the word ‘God’ is not mentioned. Other commentators, who recognise that the reference is to the divine anger, seem anxious to tone down as much as possible the meaning of phuset. Thus Armitage Robinson interprets the expression negatively and paraphrases it by words ‘in ourselves’, i.e. because we lacked divine grace. But the word physts should refer to what is innate or ingrained and not to something which is due to a defect caused by particular conditions or circumstances. In this passage therefore it draws attention to the essential constitution of fallen man, which is both the cause of the evil practices into which he has sunk, and the means by which they are persistently maintained. Just as by virtue of the original creation in the image of God men are endowed with moral sense and the gift of conscience, as Paul has stated in 2:14; so too because of their fallen nature they are inevitably involved in behaviour which renders them the objects of the divine wrath. The conclusion therefore is that, apart from the gospel, all mankind that is engendered of the seed of Adam is tekna phuset orgēs, ‘God’s displeasure’, as Knox translates Ephesians 2:3, ‘is their birthright’.

The Manifestation of the Wrath of God Under the Old Covenant

In the last half of the second chapter of the Epistle to the Romans Paul is concerned to show that the children of Abraham, who in virtue of their privileges as the chosen people of God were apt to assume that they had a right to pass judgement on the rest of

* The Epistle to the Romans, 23.
mankind, so far from being exempt from the wrath of God which is the birthright of every child of Adam, were especially the objects of it. Bearing the name of Jew, resting his confidence upon the Mosaic law and the superior knowledge which it gave him of divine things, conscious that his vocation was to be a guide of the morally unenlightened and the ethically immature, 'an instructor of the foolish and a teacher of babes', the Israelite was in fact the victim of that self-deception which blinds a man's sense of the reality and the gravity of his own sin. The apostle, it would appear, is thinking in Romans 2:16–19 not merely of the Israelites of his own day, but of the Israelites throughout the whole of their past history, which has shown them to be guilty of the very sins which they condemn in others. Paul here specifies some of these sins which can be illustrated in detail in the OT.

For all his alleged horror of stealing, the Israelite had often been guilty of such things as dishonest trading, which is a violation of the eighth commandment, 'making the ephah small and the shekel great, and dealing falsely with balances of deceit' (Rom. 2:21; Amos 8:5). For all their professed abhorrence of adultery, the sin of David with Bathsheba stood as a standing record of the fact that the best of Israelites had committed the sin which was recognised as a characteristic sin of heathendom; and because he had given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, David had inevitably incurred his wrath (2 Sam. 12:14). Moreover, God had protested through the mouth of Jeremiah that the response of his people to his goodness had been to turn the very prosperity which he had given them into an instrument for the committal of this particular sin. When I had fed them to the full, they committed adultery, and assembled themselves in troops at the harlots' houses. They were as fed horses in the morning: every one neighed after his neighbour's wife. Shall I not visit for these things saith the Lord: and shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this?" (Rom. 2:21; Jer. 5:7–9).

For all his detestation of idolatry the Israelite was guilty. Paul asserts, of 'robbing temples', even, it would seem, the temple of his own God! For had not God through Malachi denounced the laxity with which the Israelites performed the sacrifices demanded by the ritual laws of the old covenant in the words 'Will a man rob God? yet ye rob me. But ye say. Wherein have we robbed thee?' in tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with the curse: for ye rob me, even this whole nation' (Rom. 2:22; Mal. 3:8, 9)? For all his glorying in the law, the Israelite, by transgressing it, had dishonoured the God who gave it, particularly in the eyes of the surrounding nations, amongst whom his lot had been cast (Rom. 2:23; Ezek. 36:20, 23). And for all his pride in being circumcised the Israelite had tended to forget that there was no inherent security in circumcision against God's wrath.

Circumcision was a sign or seal of the covenant; but, if the moral obligations imposed by the covenant were disregarded, circumcision was as unavailing as uncircumcision (Rom. 2:25). Nor did membership of the visible congregation of Israel necessarily carry with it membership of the true Israel, in which something more was required from the worshipper than the punctilious observance of the letter of the law. God demanded an inner worship of the heart such as he alone could recognise and appraise (Rom. 2:28, 29).

Throughout the series of dramatic rhetorical questions in the closing verses of Romans 2 Paul is, in effect, drawing attention to the truth that those who prided themselves on being the people of God, were even more subject to the divine wrath than those who were outside the privileges of the divine covenant. For 'to whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required: and to whom they commit much, of him will they ask the more' (Luke 12:48). The judgment which 'begins at the house of God' (1 Pet. 4:17) is for that very reason more searching and severe. The tragedy was that the Israelite had never really recognised his sin and was too ready to class the rest of mankind as sinners. The pathetic trust which in Paul's day he had come to place in the outward and visible signs of his religion, was the climax of the continuous spiritual decline depicted in the OT.

As he surveys the story of Israel Paul is led, it would seem, to ask why this moral decline was not, and indeed could not be, arrested in spite of the punishments which God in his wrath had again and again inflicted upon his people, and in spite of the free grace of the law of Moses (that unique gift of God to Israel) a great revelation of the wrath of God against sin had been made; for, as Paul says in Romans 4:15, 'the law worketh wrath'. Just because it requires perfect obedience to its commands, it must at the same time, by the very penalties it exacts for disobedience, render the offender more subject to the divine wrath. Paul concludes that the main reason for the failure of Israel to arrest this process of moral decline lay in its wrong reaction to the forbearance of God, when so often he refrained from punishing them to the extent they deserved. When God, in the words of Psalm 1:21, had 'kept silence' after the covenant had been violated by wickedness in Israel (and the sins which the Psalmist mentions in the previous verses of this Psalm are precisely those enumerated by Paul in this passage of Romans), the Israelites fondly supposed, as we have already noticed, that God was 'even such a one as themselves', easy-going and tolerant of evil. Failing to understand that his goodness in delaying to inflict full punishment and to execute his wrath to the uttermost was designed solely to give further opportunity for repentance (Rom. 2:4), they despised 'the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering', and concluded that he was never going to 'make a full end'. How often, as soon as he turned away his anger, remembering that they were but flesh, had they proceeded to 'turn again and tempt God and provoke the Holy

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One of Israel' (Ps. 78:38-40)! They had disregarded the prophets who assured them that just because God was ‘gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy, and repented him of the evil’ (i.e. refused to display at present his wrath to the uttermost) they should ‘rend their hearts ... and turn unto the Lord their God’ (Joel 2:13). And because ‘they mocked God’s messengers, and despised his words and scoffed at his prophets’ the wrath of God arose against his people till ‘there was no remedy’ (2 Chr. 36:16).

Paul also insists, in the same way as the chronicler of old, that this abuse of God’s mercies, so far from staying the avenging hand of God, must result in an accumulation of offences which will finally receive in full the punishment they deserve. If men fail to use the opportunities for repentance; if they persist hardening their hearts as Pharaoh hardened his heart; and if, in spite of the fact that God has ‘stretched out his hand all the day long’ to them (Is 65:2) they remain a rebellious people, their hard and impenitent hearts are treasuring up for themselves wrath in the final day of wrath and of the righteous judgement of God (see Rom. 2:5). This is the only abiding wealth that the wicked possess. It is not because God has laid aside his wrath, but because he has willed to show his wrath and make his power known on the great ‘day of wrath’ that he has ‘endured with much longsuffering vessels of wrath fitted unto destruction’ (Rom. 9:22). In that final display of wrath his righteousness will be vindicated and his name glorified. The goodness of God can never therefore secure impunity to sinners; and their abuse of it must of necessity aggravate their guilt and their punishment.

Both the evidence then of the OT and the state of the Jews in Paul’s own day bore witness to the truth that Jews as well as Gentiles were the object of the divine wrath, from which nothing but the salvation wrought by Jesus Christ could rescue them; for ‘none was righteous, no not a single one’ (Rom. 3:10). Those who receive special knowledge of God and are the peculiar objects of his love must also, as the prophets insisted, be the special objects of his wrath if they disregard that knowledge and despise that love. ‘You only’, says God through Amos, ‘have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities’ (Amos 3:2). And Amos proceeds to describe in chapter four some of the ways in which God would ‘visit the transgressions of Israel upon him’. Moreover once God has decided to execute his wrath upon his people nothing that they can do can withstand it. So Ezekiel prophesies the futility of any defence by the inhabitants of Jerusalem against the Babylonians; for the downfall of the city has been decreed by God. The inhabitants of Jerusalem have indeed made preparations for defence, but they lack courage to face the enemy just because the wrath of God has predetermined their defeat. ‘They have blown the trumpet, and have made all ready; but none goeth to the battle; for my wrath is upon all the multitude thereof’ (Ezek. 7:14). ‘Who’, asked the Psalmist ‘may stand in thy sight, when once thou art angry?’ (Ps. 76:7).

It was not however to be inferred from this long story of a disobedient and backsliding people that God’s election of Israel to be a chosen instrument of his purpose had failed. If there was no ground for any boastful sense of superiority on the part of the Jew, so too there was no ground for any boasting on the part of the Gentile. God’s plan for the salvation of his elect could not be rendered void either by the disobedience of the chosen people; or by the arrogance of their oppressors; or by those whom God had called to be the instruments of his avenging wrath, but who had boasted of their own strength and assumed glory for themselves. If his anger is kindled against his own people, it is also kindled against those who sought to prevent the execution of his will for Israel. An outstanding instance of such an attempt to thwart the purposes of God is the stubbornness of Pharaoh. Yet the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart and the subsequent punishment inflicted upon him were the means by which God’s power was shown and his name published abroad in the earth (see Rom. 9:17; Exod. 4:16). Similarly because ‘Amael set himself against Israel in the way when he came out of Egypt’ Saul is bidden to be the minister of God’s avenging wrath by smiting Amael and utterly destroying ‘all that they have’ (1 Sam. 15:2, 3). And when Saul disobeys this command by sparing Agag and the best of the spoils he learns that he himself has become hostile to the Lord because ‘he did not execute the fierce wrath upon Amael’ (1 Sam. 28:18). The kings of the earth who take counsel together against the Lord, said the Psalmist, ‘shall be had in derision by the Lord, who will speak unto them in his wrath and vex them in his sore displeasure’ (see Ps. 2:1-5).

As for those whom God had summoned to inflict punishment upon Israel, such as the Assyrians, God speaks to them through Isaiah in this fashion: ‘To Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, the staff in whose hand is mine indignation! I will send him against a profane nation and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets; but the prophecy continues: ‘I will punish ... the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks. For he hath said, By the strength of my hand have I done it, and by my wisdom; for I am prudent’ (Is. 20:5, 6, 12, 13).

The prophecy of Nahum, which predicts the destruction of Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, whose crimes have merited its downfall, is prefaced by a remarkable introductory poem descriptive of the manifestation of God’s wrath in the convulsions of nature. ‘The Lord is a jealous God and avengeth; the Lord avengeth is full of wrath; the Lord taketh vengeance on his adversaries ... the Lord hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebuketh the sea, and maketh it dry, and drieth up all the rivers ... The mountains quake at him, and the hills melt; and the earth is upheaved at his presence ... Who can stand before his indignation? and who can abide in the fierceness of his anger?’ (Nah. 1:2-6). This wrath is soon to be turned against Nineveh ‘the
One of Israel’ (Ps. 78:38-40)! They had disregarded the prophets who assured them that just because God was ‘gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy, and repented him of the evil’ (i.e. refused to display at present his wrath to the uttermost) they should ‘rend their hearts ... and turn unto the Lord their God’ (Joel 2:13). And because ‘they mocked God’s messengers, and despised his words and scoffed at his prophets’ the wrath of God arose against his people till ‘there was no remedy’ (2 Chr. 36:16).

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bloody city ... all full of lies and rapine'. Because 'the prey departeth not' and Nineveh is always plundering, it will itself be the prey of the plunderer. Because 'through the glamour of its power and the speciousness of its statecraft it has seduced to their ruin the peoples that entered into relations with it ... it will undergo degradation parallel to that inflicted upon an unchaste woman.' Similarly, when Habakkuk complained to God that the Chaldeans whom God had raised up to punish his people were themselves a wicked people, he was told that, because the soul of the Chaldean was puffed up and not upright in him (see Hab. 2:4); and because he had used his victories as occasions for evil gain and tyrannical oppression, he too would become the object of the divine wrath. The third chapter of Habakkuk contains a poem descriptive of God marching forth to execute his wrath 'against all peoples who thwart his purposes'. Thou didst march through the land in indignation, thou didst thresh the nations in anger. Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people, for the salvation of thine anointed' (Hab. 3:12, 13).

Another very vivid description of God's vengeance upon the enemies of Israel is to be found in Isaiah 63:1–6. The prophet sees God coming from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah 'stained with the blood of his enemies; and God tells him that he alone 'in the greatness of his strength' could so scourge his people in their distress. 'I have trodden the winepress alone; ... yea, I trampled them in mine anger, and trampled them in my fury; and their life-blood sprinkled upon my garments ... For the day of vengeance was in mine heart, and the year of my redeemed is come'.

These last two passages remind us that, though God's people deserve and receive in part punishment at the hands of God, who is angry when faced with sin, and who must give expression through his anger to his sovereignty and his justice, nevertheless in his dealings with Israel under the covenant relationship he is concerned to make ready the way (if need be by the extermination of his enemies) for the execution of his plan for the salvation of his elect. The love of God does not eliminate his wrath, but it prevents him from giving full expression to it in his dealings with Israel. In his loving mercy he has chosen Israel to be a peculiar people, the people of the covenant; and that covenant relationship can never be abandoned till a new covenant has been established. However much Israel may sin, it was called out of Egypt to be the son of God's love (Hos. 11:1). Samaria, the city where Israel dwelt, could never therefore become as Sodom or as one of the cities of the Plain. Such is the burden of God's tender pleadings in Hosea 11:8 ff.: 'How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? How shall I deliver thee, Israel? How shall I make thee as Admah? How shall I set thee as Zoan? Mine heart is turned within me, my compassions are kindled together. I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger; I will not return to destroy Ephraim: for I am God and not man'.

But the most tender, perhaps, of all such expressions of God's love for Israel, which leads him to refuse to abandon the covenant relationship with his chosen people, and necessitates a limitation of his anger, is that contained in Isaiah 54:8, 10: 'in overflowing wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy redeemer ... For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall my covenant of peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.' Or, as the same truth is expressed in Micah 7:18, 'He retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy.'

We can sum up this part of our study by saying that under the old covenant the nature of sin was made clear; and men were forced by the destructive manifestations of God's power to recognise that his attitude towards sin can only be one of wrath. The old covenant could not, however, save men from sin, nor put them right with God. But when through the revelation given in the law and the prophets, and through the unmistakable signs of the divine wrath in the providential ordering of human affairs, God had revealed himself in his absolute sovereignty, his perfect holiness, and his unfailing justice, then the old covenant had done its work, and the way was open for the establishment of the new. In other words, when the truth had at least partially been learned, as Job eventually learned it, in the bitter school of suffering, that man must not contend with God his Maker; that all human pride must be crushed before him who reveals himself in the whirlwind; and that the sinner must be humiliated and 'abhor himself and repent in dust and ashes' (Job 42:6, 6), then the infinite pity and mercy of God, of which the OT so often speaks, could break through into human history in the person of his incarnate Son. In Jesus the loving purposes of God set forth in the OT. come finally to fulfiment; but not, let us notice, by any abandonment of the reality of his wrath or by any refusal to display it. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is the same God who challenged Job to pour forth, if he could, the overflows of his anger, and look upon every one that is proud and abuse him and bring him low (see Job 40:11, 12). To manifest anger effectively against the pride which constitutes human sin is still, and must always be, the sole prerogative of Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our next task therefore must be to see how in Jesus Christ we have a revelation from heaven not only of the goodness, but also of the severity of God.

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G.W. Wade's paraphrase of Nahum 3:4, 5 in A New Commentary on Holy Scripture, 592.
bloody city ... all full of lies and rapine’. Because ‘the prey departeth not’ and Nineveh is always plundering, it will itself be the prey of the plunderer. Because ‘through the glamour of its power and the speciousness of its statecraft it has seduced to their ruin the peoples that entered into relations with it ... it will undergo degradation parallel to that inflicted upon an unchaste woman.’ Similarly, when Habakkuk complained to God that the Chaldeans whom God had raised up to punish his people were themselves a wicked people, he was told that, because the soul of the Chaldean was puffed up and not upright in him (see Hab. 2:4); and because he had used his victories as occasions for evil gain and tyrannical oppression, he too would become the object of the divine wrath. The third chapter of Habakkuk contains a poem descriptive of God marching forth to execute his wrath ‘against all peoples who thwart his purposes’. Thou didst march through the land in indignation, thou didst thresh the nations in anger. Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people, for the salvation of thine anointed’ (Hab. 3:12, 13). Another very vivid description of God’s vengeance upon the enemies of Israel is to be found in Isaiah 63:1-6. The prophet sees God coming from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah‘ stained with the blood of his enemies; and God tells him that he alone ‘in the greatness of his strength’ could so succour his people in their distress. I have trodden the winepress alone; yea, I trod them in mine anger, and trampled them in my fury; and their lifeblood is sprinkled upon my garments ... For the day of vengeance was in mine heart, and the year of my redeemed is come.’

These last two passages remind us that, though God’s people deserve and receive in part punishment at the hands of God, who is angry when faced with sin, and who must give expression through his anger to his sovereignty and his justice, nevertheless in his dealings with Israel under the covenant relationship he is concerned to make ready the way (if need be by the extermination of his enemies) for the execution of his plan for the salvation of his elect. The love of God does not eliminate his wrath, but it prevents him from giving full expression to it in his dealings with Israel. In his loving mercy he has chosen Israel to be a peculiar people, the people of the covenant; and that covenant relationship can never be abandoned till a new covenant has been established. However much Israel may sin, it was called out of Egypt to be the son of God’s love (Hos. 11:1). Samaria, the city where Israel dwelt, could never therefore become as Sodom or as one of the cities of the Plain. Such is the burden of God’s tender pleadings in Hosea 11:8 ff.: ‘How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? How shall I deliver thee, Israel? How shall I make thee as Admah? How shall I set thee as Zoan? Mine heart is turned within me, my compassion is kindled together. I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger; I will not return to destroy Ephraim: for I am God and not man’.

But the most tender, perhaps, of all such expressions of God’s love for Israel, which leads him to refuse to abandon the covenant relationship with his chosen people, and necessitates a limitation of his anger, is that contained in Isaiah 54:8, 10: ‘In overflowing wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy redeemer ... For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall my covenant of peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.’ Or, as the same truth is expressed in Micah 7:18, ‘He retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy.’

We can sum up this part of our study by saying that under the old covenant the nature of sin was made clear; and men were forced by the destructive manifestations of God’s power to recognise that his attitude towards sin can only be one of wrath. The old covenant could not, however, save men from sin, nor put them right with God. But when through the revelation given in the law and the prophets, and through the unmistakable signs of the divine wrath in the providential ordering of human affairs, God had revealed himself in his absolute sovereignty, his perfect holiness, and his unfauling justice, – then the old covenant had done its work, and the way was open for the establishment of the new. In other words, when the truth had at least partially been learned, as Job eventually learned it, in the bitter school of suffering, that man must not contend with God his Maker; that all human pride must be crushed before him who reveals himself in the whirlwind; and that the sinner must be humiliated and ‘abhor himself and repent in dust and ashes’ (Job 42:6), – then the infinite pity and mercy of God, of which the OT so often speaks, could break through into human history in the person of his incarnate Son. In Jesus the loving purposes of God set forth in the OT, come finally to fulfilment; but not, let us notice, by any abandonment of the reality of his wrath or by any refusal to display it. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is the same God who challenged Job to pour forth, if he could, the overflows of his anger, and look upon every one that is proud and abuse him and bring him low (see Job 40:11, 12). To manifest anger effectively against the pride which constitutes human sin is still, and must always be, the sole prerogative of almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our next task therefore must be to see how in Jesus Christ we have a revelation from heaven not only of the goodness, but also of the severity of God.

* G.W. Wade’s paraphrase of Nahum 3:4, 5 in A New Commentary on Holy Scripture, 592.