

JUDGEMENT, WRATH & CURSING

We live in a time of relative peace and prosperity. One of our highest cultural values is freedom, which we understand as personal autonomy to do whatever we want. Given this context it's hardly surprising that words like judgement, wrath and cursing sound like disturbing and very unwelcome intrusions from another world. Yet when we read the Bible we find plenty of all three, and they're welcomed and even celebrated. Clearly the authors of the Bible had a very different perspective on them to that of our culture. Two questions quickly present themselves: How are judgement, wrath and cursing understood in the Bible and how can they be reconciled with a God of love?

We'll start by reviewing some basic elements of the Bible's worldview. The Bible presents one good God who created a wonderful world and who created us to steward that world. His desire was to shower his creation with blessing and for us to share in that blessing and reflect his goodness and generosity in the world. However, we rejected God (sin) and embraced evil, ruining God's wonderful world and leaving us enslaved to evil and death. Evil can be defined as the opposite to God's character and brings disorder, decay and death to God's wonderful world. We live in God's wonderful, ruined world.

The good news of the Bible is that God loves us and hasn't abandoned his creation to its fate. God is acting to rescue the world from evil and death and restore it to his original intention. However, to us, this is a double edged sword. On the one hand we long to be liberated from injustice, evil, suffering and death. On the other hand we recognise that we're not just victims of evil and injustice, we're also in some measure, agents of evil and injustice. It's normally easier for us to recognise that there are bad people in the world than for us to recognise our own shortcomings and failures. We're both victims and villains, wonderful, ruined people in God's wonderful, ruined world.

This gives us a context to consider God's character as he addresses sin, evil and death within his world. How would we expect a God of love to respond to evil which is seeking to disfigure and ultimately destroy the good world he has created? We would expect a God of love to be utterly, passionately and consistently hostile to evil. And that's what we find when we turn to the Bible. God's wrath is not something in tension with his love, it is his pure love responding in fierce hostility and total opposition to evil. This is an entirely appropriate response. Anyone who reads an average newspaper dispassionately clearly isn't very engaged or doesn't care much about the regular horrors being reported. A god who's ambivalent towards evil would not be a god of love.

But God's wrath, his fierce, unrelenting hostility to evil, is not just an emotion. God's wrath leads him to act. God's desire is to bless (shower his favour) on his creation so it will flourish. But if God blesses evil then evil will flourish and further ruin his world. When God curses evil and the agents of evil, it's to hinder them and thus contain its influence and protect his world from its power. Cursing is an act of inhibiting evil and thus protecting his world. This creates a significant tension between God's desire to bless people resulting in them flourishing, and the fact that the people he wishes to bless are also agents of evil which must be contained. This tension is very quickly apparent on the pages of the Bible and throughout human history and experience.

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Moving on to judgement, if God's wrath is his fierce, unrelenting hostility to sin and evil, then his judgement is him acting decisively against sin and evil. People often ask why God doesn't act to end human suffering. In general terms, when we ask God to act against human suffering, we're asking him to act against the ultimate root of suffering which is sin and evil. In other words we're asking God to judge. Ultimately, the only hope for the world to be rescued from sin and evil and death is for God to judge sin, evil and death. Again, this sets up a tension for us who, as the victims of sin, evil and death, long for God to judge, and us as the agents of sin and evil, who are rightly nervous about God acting as judge. This is why the central elements of the message of Jesus and his death and resurrection are forgiveness for what we've done wrong and new life which gives us the power to change and overcome sin and evil in our lives.

So, God's wrath is the fierce, unrelenting hostility of his love to all that seeks to destroy his world. Cursing is God's love withdrawing blessing to prevent sin and evil from flourishing, containing evil and protecting the world. Judgement is the love of God acting decisively against sin and evil to rescue his creation.

A final example. Some typical verses about God's judgement which make many people uncomfortable would be Psalm 5:4-6 'You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong. You destroy those who tell lies; bloodthirsty and deceitful men the LORD abhors.' To see why this may be considered a positive thing, we can consider the alternative: 'You are a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked can dwell. The arrogant can stand in your presence; you love all who do wrong. You protect those who tell lies; in bloodthirsty and deceitful men the LORD delights.' It's not difficult to see why most people would prefer the Biblical version of this Psalm.

To understand why wrath, cursing and judgement are viewed positively, we must bear in mind they represent God's hostility and action against all that defaces and destroys the world which he loves. Our ultimate hope is that God will act in judgement to rescue the world from sin, evil and death. But as agents of sin, evil and death, we first need God's forgiveness and new life so that we don't find ourselves as part of the problem that God has to deal with in that judgement.

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