

THE LOVE AND WRATH OF GOD



OUR VIEW OF GOD AND OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM

The most important idea in our head is our understanding of God. Tozer put it starkly: "Nothing twists and deforms the soul more than a low or unworthy conception of God." Our picture of God determines how we interact with his creation and is fundamental to our perception of ourselves since we bear his image. We cannot know ourselves apart from knowing him. But our aim is not simply to define God, not just to know about him but to know him. A set of propositions about God is very different from an intimate, personal relationship with him. As he says through Jeremiah: "let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me..." 9:24

To move from understanding to knowing requires us to open our inmost selves to him: a joyful surrender, a willing submission, a happy consent. If we're to know our creator it will be on terms appropriate for a creature relating to our creator. If we're to open ourselves up with such vulnerability to the one who utterly transcends us then we must be able to deeply trust him. We must be confident in his character.

THE TWO SIDES OF GOD

And at this point that we run into an age old problem. The Bible presents a very rich portrait of God. I fear that in our Evangelical culture we're often guilty of so grossly caricaturing God that for many it is very difficult to trust him. Certainly wholly abandoning ourselves to him feels at best extremely risky. In what follows I exaggerate to illustrate my point.

On the one hand we see God's love again and again in the Bible issuing out in mercy and grace. We see it in his extraordinary kindness and long suffering in the face of the repeated apostasy of Israel. We see it in the cross. Perhaps most tenderly we see it in the parable of the father, the prodigal son and his dutiful brother. We see his love and we feel reassured and drawn into the Father's embrace.

On the other hand we also see in the Bible God's holiness issuing out in wrath and judgement. We see it in his ruthlessness in dealing with Israel's sin. We see it in the cross. We see it finally reach its culmination in the chilling visions of the book of Revelation. We see his holiness and we feel uncomfortable and wonder how opening ourselves up to such a powerful and angry God could possibly be a good idea!

THE GOSPEL

These two aspects of God's character are often further polarised in the way we present the gospel. On the one hand we set up the human problem in terms of God's holiness. We point to our scarlet sin before his burning purity. In doing this we instinctively think of his holiness as his moral purity. We recognise that before his holiness, we're in trouble.

On the other hand, although God's wrath burns against our sin, he loves us and wants to have mercy on us.





Our problem is caused by our sin before his holiness and our hope is in his love. When the gospel is taught in this way it leads us to fear his holiness and wrath and to hope in his love and mercy. This contains some truth but can subtly introduce a division in our perception of God's character: a tension between his holiness and his love.

There's one side of God that we really genuinely love but the other side of God is deeply to be feared. The resolution normally offered is that Jesus has taken God's wrath and judgement on himself on our behalf on the cross so we need not fear it anymore. Again, this is true, but there's a problem. Our unease over the holiness, wrath and judgement of God usually remains. His love and wrath don't sit easily together with us.

TAKING SIDES

With this view of love and holiness it's remarkably difficult to maintain an integrated view of God's character. We generally lean towards one or the other and join with others who lean the same way as us. This is reflected in the church.

The liberals lean away from God's holiness and wrath towards his love and mercy. By emphasising his love and mercy they hold out a very warm and inclusive view of God. However, to the degree that they de-emphasise his holiness, they encourage an "anything goes" mentality. Whilst they gain inclusivity they lose their prophetic ability to confront sin and evil and compromise slips in.

The conservatives are often pushed into taking the other side. They powerfully critique sin and evil and uphold God's justice. However this can easily slip over into a position where God's love can be partially eclipsed. God's wrath and judgement are sometimes preached with a relish that seem very hard to hold together with his love. We may wonder whether God's wrath has been modelled after our own anger.

THE MISSING PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

How then are we to reconcile God's love, mercy and grace with his holiness, wrath and judgement? How can we hold a unified understanding of God's character without creating tension between the different ways we see his character revealed? If we're truly to know him we must be able to open ourselves up to all of him. We cannot simply pick the bits that seem good to us and deny the rest without slipping into unreality.

It seems to me that the key to resolving this apparent contradiction is in our understanding of sin and evil. Failure to be clear over this confuses everything and leads us to disastrously confuse the heart of God. I believe that many privately have a view of sin and of God's response to it that undermines any attempt to grasp God's heart.

Culture's view of sin has slowly and subconsciously seeped into the church. That view is that sin is quite good fun, as an old television ad for cream cakes put it: "naughty but nice!" We think that sin is not really such a big deal but God finds it offensive and gets angry so we should try not to do it. We think that the primary problem is God's ego, that his moral holiness is affronted and the reason we have a problem is because he has a problem. Essentially we think of God as a Victorian prude! If he was a little more liberal (in the liberal view) or we were a little more Victorian (in the conservative view), all this could be resolved. This is a travesty of God's holiness which is again ruthlessly set upon by Tozer:

From a failure to properly understand God comes a world of unhappiness ... The Christian life is thought to be a glum, unrelieved cross-carrying under the eye of a stern Father who expects much and excuses nothing. He is austere, peevish, highly temperamental, and extremely hard to please. The kind of life which springs out of such libellous





notions must of necessity be but a parody on the true life in Christ.

If we're to understand God, we must see sin and evil for what it is. Sin and evil is the opposite of goodness and love. It destroys every good thing it infects. It drags us to death and fits us for hell. It's utterly opposed to the image of God and is utterly ruinous to the whole creation. It is to love and life what drinking bleach is to health and long life. Sin is sugar coated death. Evil is the essence of the devil and hell.

BRINGING HOLINESS AND LOVE TOGETHER

When we have a right view of sin and evil we have the possibility of a right view of God's wrath and judgement. If we think about it this is obvious. God's love and grace are unfailing, there's never a time when they're not manifest. However, God's wrath and judgement are a response to sin and evil. If there's no sin and evil, there's no need for wrath and judgement.

Here, I believe, we come to the key that resolves the tension. Wrath and judgement are the response of God's love to sin and evil. God's love is not in tension with his holiness. Indeed the unfailing nature of his love and grace lie at the heart of his holiness. His wrath and judgement don't mark a suspension of his love and mercy but an expression of it. God unfailingly and unswervingly loves people. Sin and evil unswervingly seek to ruin and destroy people. Thus God's wrath against sin and evil are, in some sense, the measure of his love. It's precisely because he so loves his creation and his creatures that his hostility to sin and evil is so fierce and unrelenting.

From this flows his judgement. His judgement is not him getting even with those who've offended his moral sensibilities. His judgement is him rescuing his creation and creatures by separating them out from sin and evil. His wrath is his fierce hostility to sin and evil and his judgement is him acting decisively against sin and evil.

When we see this it makes perfect sense that God's wrath and judgement should be expressions of the depth of his love. It also makes sense of why so many of the characters in the Bible cry out for God's wrath and judgement. It's only in times of peace and prosperity, particularly when this is sustained by great global injustice, that we fear God's judgement.

In this light the fundamental human problem is that having been infected with sin and evil we are now agents of sin and evil. Thus we've become identified with the thing that God is so fiercely opposed to. Salvation is about God separating us and the creation out from sin and evil. Judgement is the completion of salvation. The only people who will not experience salvation are those who will not allow themselves to be separated from sin.

TRUSTING OUR FATHER'S GOODNESS

Once the holiness and love of God are clearly seen together this changes everything. His wrath and judgement can be embraced and celebrated as expressions of his love in a world infected with sin and evil. The only cause for fear is for those who are wilfully harbouring sin and evil and thus are agents of ruin and death.

This understanding of holiness, wrath and judgement can be celebrated and embraced. It resolves the tension described and opens the door for trust and true, wholehearted abandonment to God. A heart opened to God will find that love has great transforming power. It produces a holiness that is not austere and judgemental but that is full of grace and truth, inclusive of people but exclusive of sin. As John puts it:





So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us.

1 JOHN 4:16-19 NRSV

With this understanding of the unity of God's character we have a lens through which to interpret both the Bible and our circumstances. This makes possible a deep trust in God that leads to ever greater consecration and fruitfulness. The goodness of God's heart in turn begins to reproduce his holiness and his love in us. We're able to rejoice and worship him without reserve for his wrath and mercy, grace and judgement. PSALM 85:7-11:

Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation... Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss

