

## **APPRECIATING GOD'S LOVING ANGER**

When we first come to know God, we are overwhelmed by His love. And we should be. God's love is meant to be read, studied, accepted, and experienced. But just like in any relationship with those we love, there will be times in our Christian life when we begin to wonder, *Have I made God angry? Does He really get angry at all?*

What about God's anger? When was the last time you studied the subject? When was the last time you heard a sermon or Bible study on this theme? This is perhaps the least explored side of His mercy and grace. But to appreciate God's loving anger is to understand the surprising side of His grace. The goal of this booklet, therefore, is to give us a new appreciation for the anger of God.

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### **WHAT DOES GOD'S ANGER LOOK LIKE?**

Two hundred homes along the Pacific coast are incinerated in a brush fire. They are completely destroyed. Is this God's anger at work?

A local civic leader who was caught in an affair with his neighbor's wife now has lung cancer. Is this God's anger?

Two teens were out drinking on a Friday night. They plowed their car into a tree. One is paralyzed for life. Is this God's anger?

You promised God in January that you would read the Bible every day, but you gave up by March. Now it's July and you didn't get the big promotion at work you had been counting on. Is this God's anger?

It's difficult to identify God's anger in the current events in our lives. And it's almost impossible to recognize God's anger toward other people.

We live in a fallen world. Many tragedies result from the natural consequences of living in a world that is bent out of shape by the sin of humankind. The earth quakes, rivers rise, shots are fired at random, bridges collapse, airplanes crash--yet none may be direct expressions of God's anger.

So, can we recognize God's anger? And even if we can, why should we? Shouldn't we just concentrate on God's love and mercy and grace?

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### **WHY SHOULD WE STUDY GOD'S ANGER?**

Anyone who truly desires to grow in knowledge of God will want to come face-to-face with understanding His anger. Even a superficial review of a Bible concordance will show that there are as many references in the Bible to God's anger, fury, and wrath as there are to His love.

This does not mean, of course, that we serve an angry God. Rather, we serve a loving God who does at times get angry. This is perhaps the least explored side of His mercy and grace. It is like the backside of a mountain that many climbers never bother exploring. To appreciate God's loving anger is to understand the surprising side of His grace.

God's anger is His just, intense indignation and displeasure caused by the injury, insult, injustice, and wickedness of mankind, both individual and corporate. J. I. Packer calls it "a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil" (*Knowing God*, J. I. Packer, InterVarsity Press, p.136).

God's anger continues to be a subject that most of us would like to avoid. Sometimes we feel it's a dark, foreboding, threatening topic. Or we think a study of God's anger should be reserved for the theologians and their research papers.

But I believe there are many benefits in studying God's anger. These include, for example: an exalted respect for God's character, a greater confidence in His protection, an increased motivation for holiness and obedience, and a clearer understanding of the intensity of His love.

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## **HOW IS GOD'S ANGER DIFFERENT FROM OURS?**

Each of us is an artist. We all paint pictures. We dip into the wellsprings of shapes, sizes, colors, concepts, ideas, dreams, and experiences--and out of these we unfold intricate masterpieces of imagery in our minds. Imagination is a gift of God given at creation. It enlivens potentially dull lives, breaks up boredom, and snaps us out of lethargy with flashes of ingenuity.

Yet, at times our imaginations fail us. There are limits to what we can conceive. Take the subject of God, for instance. Our minds strain to grasp an understanding of what He is like. The information fed into our computer-like brains does not all fit into our preset categories. God is too immense.

So we have a standoff between the vastness of God and our limited minds. One possible solution would be to devise a way to raise our capacity for wisdom and knowledge. But we have so far to go. It seems hopeless. "The foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1 Cor. 1:25).

Even in the accelerating advance of scientific knowledge in our century, we are still at a loss when trying to define such things as time, space, energy, and eternity. Is it any wonder that we have trouble understanding all there is to know about the Lord God Almighty?

Since we can't boost our intelligence enough, we try to lower God to the reach of our understanding. We humanize Him. And we've been doing that for a long time. Using human traits to describe God is called anthropomorphizing. Here's how it works.

Any beginning Bible reader knows that God is Spirit (Jn. 4:24). Therefore He is not confined to a physical body as we know it. But it's hard for you and me to discuss a bodyless person in loving, intimate terms. So we anthropomorphize Him. Here are a few examples of this in Scripture:

- Your hands made me and formed me; give me understanding to learn Your commands (Ps. 119:73).
- The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and His ears are attentive to their cry; the face of the LORD is against those who do evil (Ps. 34:15-16).
- The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms (Dt. 33:27).

Now we have a God who has hands, eyes, ears, arms, and a face. This helps us to relate to Him in a personal way.

We do the same thing with God's personality. The Bible says God is wise. "To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen" (Rom. 16:27). So we think of God as Grandpa Miller, who knew the answers to every childhood question.

We are told that God is knowledgeable. "Lord, You know all things" (Jn. 21:17). And we think of God as Professor MacMillen, who had three doctorates and was fluent in 26 languages.

We learn that God is good. "Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; His love endures forever" (Ps. 118:29). This reminds us of Miss Torres, who lived next door and never said an unkind word about anyone in her whole life.

We're taught that God is loving. "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 Jn. 4:8). This makes us think of Mom, after we skinned our knee and she rocked us in her lap.

The Bible reveals that God is gracious. We are "justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24). This makes us think about our fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Welch, who let us turn in our History of California Missions report even though we accidentally dropped it in the mud on the way to school.

Then we discover that God is holy. "Who among the gods is like You, O LORD? Who is like You--majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" (Ex. 15:11). Holiness reminds us of Mr. Hannah, who taught junior-high and high-school Sunday school for 25 years.

We read that God is truthful. "God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should change His mind. Does He speak and then not act? Does He promise and not fulfill?" (Num. 23:19). All of this reminds us of Mrs. Williams at the corner market. She would always count our change out penny by penny and never let us pay too much.

We study the Bible and discover that God is just. "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; love and faithfulness go before You" (Ps. 89:14). This causes us to imagine one like Judge Houk, sitting stately in the municipal court.

On and on the list could go. When we discover a quality about God, we look for a similar quality in someone around us. Then we say to ourselves, "That's the way God is!" To a point, that is a helpful process. We do need to make our relationship with God personal. He is not a blind force, an abstract energy field, or merely an ideal image of good.

But our mistake comes when we begin to think we can limit God to human categories. We are mistaken, for instance, if we learn what love is like from our relationship to our mate, and then project its ultimate expression to God. Instead, we should learn what love is like by getting to know God, and then apply that trait to ourselves and others.

It all looks so different from above. And this is an extremely important distinction. God is not a glorified, sinless, exalted man. His character is uniquely His own and will not be contained in human categories.

We see a good example of this when we take a look at God's anger. Our normal pattern is to think of a situation in which we have been angry--or when people have been angry with us--and then say to ourselves, "That's the way God's anger is." But God's anger is not like ours.

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## THE FAULTS OF HUMAN ANGER

There are at least four faults with human anger that are never a part of God's.

**Our Anger Is Capricious.** We are impulsive, unpredictable, and fickle. In 1 Samuel 18--27 we have a picture of the relationship between King Saul and David. Saul, grateful for David's triumph over Goliath, showed him honor by bringing him into the royal household. Then Saul twice attempted to kill David by throwing a spear at him. Saul promised to give David his daughter Merab for a wife. He changed his mind and gave him Michal instead. Saul became afraid of David and chased him off. When Jonathan, Saul's son, interceded, Saul restored David to the household.

Saul once again threw a spear at David. He pursued David with his whole army, but David refused to harm Saul when he had opportunity. Saul, finding out about David's loyalty, repented for a while, then set out again to kill David. Still, David refused to harm Saul when he had the opportunity, and again Saul repented and invited David to come home, but David refused.

Man's anger, as seen in Saul, is so unpredictable that we don't know what to expect next. "I wonder what kind of mood he'll be in today," we say of a boss, co-worker, or spouse. Sometimes moods erupt without apparent logic.

God is not that way. He is not moody. He does not have bad days.

**Our Anger Is Self-indulgent.** Human anger may be controlled by selfish desires. We use it as a weapon to get things for ourselves.

In 1 Kings 21 we see an account about Ahab, the king of Israel. It seems that he had a palace in the beautiful, fertile valley of Jezreel. A man named Naboth owned a small vineyard close to the palace. Gazing over the countryside one day, Ahab decided it would be nice to have a garden close by. Just a place to stroll through in the heat of the day and pluck a few figs or cucumbers. In fact, Naboth's vineyard would be a perfect place for the king's garden.

So Ahab offered to buy the vineyard, but Naboth declined. To sell was out of the question. That vineyard had been in the family since the days of Joshua. In response, Ahab stormed into his bedroom and refused to eat supper. He pouted in anger. Jezebel, Ahab's wife, consoled him by arranging Naboth's death and confiscating the property.

We react like Ahab in closer-to-home situations. We march out of the living room in a huff because the family would not agree to watch a particular television program. We yell at the kids because they used the sports page in the cat litter box before we had a chance to read it. We exchange harsh words with our wife because the "extra" money we had been saving for fishing gear was used to buy new bathroom curtains.

Our anger is often motivated by selfishness. God's never is. It is not self-indulgent.

**Our Anger Is Petty.** The matters over which we become angry are usually trivial. It happens to even the best of disciples. You remember James and his brother John? They traveled with Jesus to Jerusalem passing through Samaria in what we might call the West Bank today. In those days many avoided going through that area because they feared spiritual pollution. Jesus didn't seem to worry about such things. While approaching a Samaritan village, He sent some of the disciples ahead to arrange for provisions. The Samaritans refused them.

James and John were shocked at the lack of hospitality. "Lord, do You want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" (Lk. 9:54). In the anger of the moment they felt that denial of a meal deserved annihilation of the

whole city. "But Jesus turned and rebuked them" (Lk. 9:55). The "Sons of Thunder" (Mk. 3:17), as Jesus would call them, were way too trivial with their anger. But God's anger is never petty.

**Our Anger Is Touchy.** We're easily annoyed. Anger comes quickly. At times, we think of such a reaction as a strong, positive quality.

Take a look at Lamech in Genesis 4:19-24. He had been offended. A lad struck out in anger against Lamech and wounded him. So Lamech hit back. But he didn't return wound for wound. He killed the boy, and then bragged to his family. "No one can mess around with me and get away with it!" he said in effect.

We're sometimes that way. We use anger to force our way on others. But God's anger is different. He is not easily disturbed.

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## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF GOD'S ANGER

We will only begin to grasp the quality of God's anger when we can set aside the idea that anger is always capricious, self-indulgent, petty, and touchy. His anger stems from a pure and loving heart that will not and indeed cannot harbor an evil motive.

**God's Anger Is Always Justified.** With regard to God's anger, no one has a legitimate right to say, "But, Lord, it isn't fair!" God is always fair. His anger always has a just cause. When we cry out to God that He is being unfair, we assert that we are not receiving what we deserve. But think that through. Do you and I really want to receive all that we deserve?

The Bible reminds us that there is a direct relationship between our actions and God's reaction. "You, O LORD, are loving. Surely You will reward each person according to what he has done" (Ps. 62:12). That's what we call justice. Only the mature are able to accept reproof and correction without resentment.

Never has a person faced the wrath of God without just cause. Robert complained because he got custody of his two daughters only one weekend per month. "It's not fair! Why is God doing this to me?" he whined. He should have considered all that before he ran off to Las Vegas for a week with that young waitress.

God is not a divine referee who sometimes makes bad calls. His anger is always justified.

**God's Anger Is Always Initiated By Disobedience.** There would be no occasion for divine anger in a sinless world. Adam and Eve, wandering through the trees before the Fall, never once witnessed God's anger. He did warn them that they would be punished if they chose to disobey. But they must not have believed Him. They soon learned the truth--and tasted of His anger.

In Genesis 4 there is the familiar account of Cain and his brother Abel. God "did not look with favor" on Cain's offering (v.5). God saw into Cain's heart. He warned him to persevere in his struggle against sin. But Cain became even more rebellious. Rather than master the sin, he allowed it to master him. He killed his brother. God's anger and His punishment were just. Cain complained that it wasn't fair, "My punishment is more than I can bear" (v.13). But he was wrong. God is fair. Cain did survive--east of Eden.

Paul quoted Malachi when he said, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (Rom. 9:13). Why did God hate Esau? Was it just an act of divine arbitrary selection? No. Esau, the eldest, thought lightly of the promises of God. The Lord God may have promised a great nation and many future blessings to his grandfather Abraham and father Isaac, but Esau lived only for the present. "What do I get out of it right now?" he demanded to know.

Faith is believing that God has done, is doing, and will do all that He has said He will do. Esau demonstrated his lack of faith when he traded his birthright for a bowl of stew. Hebrews 12:15-17 explains the dilemma:

See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.

God showed His anger toward Adam and Eve, toward Cain, and toward Esau. But in every case it was their own actions that precipitated God's reaction. The amazing thing in each of these passages is not that God becomes angry. Surely each of us gives Him ample reason. The astounding thing is that God does not often show anger. He is a gracious, loving, forgiving, and merciful God. His anger is based on our actions. His mercy comes in spite of our actions and comes solely from the heart of a loving Father.

**God Is Slow To Anger.** "But You, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Ps. 86:15). Jonah knew this, but he didn't like it. When God called him to preach to the Ninevites, Jonah did not want to go. They were a fierce and cruel people. They had devastated the land of Israel. As far as Jonah was concerned, they did not deserve to hear the words of the Lord.

So Jonah fled from God's call. The great fish spit him out on the shore, and he reluctantly went to Nineveh. Walking throughout the city, Jonah blasted them with doom: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned" (Jon. 3:4).

His assignment completed, Jonah squatted on a hillside overlooking the city. He wanted a good view of the destruction. But it never came. The people believed Jonah and repented. They humbled themselves before God. So the Lord postponed their calamity. Jonah was furious. He was angry at God:

O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love (Jon. 4:2).

When it comes to other people, we want God's anger to be instant and His retribution swift. That's what we would do if we were God. But we aren't God, and He isn't us.

When the evil of our world is not punished instantly, it doesn't mean that God doesn't care. It doesn't mean that He is powerless. He sees, He remembers, He will insist on justice. But let us stand in awe of His patience, seeing how much He puts up with while He waits for us to recognize His love and change our ways.

The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9).

**God's Anger Does Not Last Long.** "Sing to the LORD, you saints of His; praise His holy name. For His anger lasts only a moment, but His favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning" (Ps. 30:4-5).

The exile of God's people that followed the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC was an expression of God's anger. What had they done to deserve such drastic action? Jeremiah 2:32 tells us, "My people have forgotten Me, days without number." The Lord further declared, "My people are fools; they do not know Me. They are senseless children; they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good" (Jer. 4:22). Their failure is summed up in Jeremiah 35: "You have not paid attention or listened to Me" (v.15).

Rampant apostasy. Perverted worship. Corrupt priests. The people rejected God's love and forgiveness. What did they deserve? Enslavement? Abandonment? Death? Even as God allowed the temple to be destroyed and Jerusalem laid in ruins, even as the people were herded off to a foreign land, even then God promised to bring them back and show His compassion once again. According to Jeremiah's prophecy, the punishment would take 70 years (Jer. 25:11-12). In the history of an individual man, that's a whole lifetime. In the history of this world, it's but a blink of the eye.

"His anger lasts only a moment" (Ps. 30:5). It's quite unlike yours and mine.

**God Often Restraints His Anger.** None of us has ever felt the full power of God's displeasure. When Adam and Eve rebelled, they claimed authority that belonged to God. He had forewarned them what the punishment would be. If He had struck them down immediately, that would have been just.

But He didn't do that. He drove them out of the Garden and they experienced a cessation of the close fellowship with God that they had known before. Adam and Eve were given plenty of time to think over what they had done. And God continued to watch over them.

The people of Israel felt God's fury many times. They faced plagues and pestilences and military defeats. But they never faced the full wrath of God:

He was merciful; He forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them. Time after time He restrained His anger and did not stir up His full wrath (Ps. 78:38).

Jesus too restrained His anger. In the account of the woman caught in adultery (Jn. 8:1-11), the religious leaders were correct in assuming that she had committed a heinous offense against God. The Bible strongly condemns adultery. Jesus could have justly ordered the woman's (and the man's) death. But Jesus restrained His judgment. Why? Shouldn't every infringement of God's commands be quickly and thoroughly punished? The answer is given in Isaiah:

For My own name's sake I delay My wrath; for the sake of My praise I hold it back from you, so as not to cut you off (48:9).

If God did not restrain His anger, there would be no one left to praise Him, to bring Him glory. To catch a frightening glimpse of God's just anger coming to earth in full strength, re-read the book of Revelation. A glance at almost any chapter reminds us that God's anger is greatly restrained in our present age.

**God's Anger Is Neutralized By Our Repentance.** Let's not try to fool ourselves. God is not a department-store Santa Claus, paid to tell us nice things. Remember, Hebrews 10:31 warns that "it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." And Romans 11:22 reminds us, "Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in His kindness."

Our rebellion against God should throw us into great fear and dread of the consequences of our actions. David was a mighty king, a mighty warrior, and a mighty sinner. Nathan knew that only too well. In a burst of spiritual fortitude, Nathan confronted the powerful king about his sins of adultery and murder. David's instant response was noteworthy: "I have sinned against the LORD" (2 Sam. 12:13).

David didn't try to justify his actions by blaming them on the stress of his job. He didn't deny what he had done. He didn't even try to rationalize that the deeds were not so bad after all. He recognized sin as sin. He cast himself on God's mercy. And Nathan replied, "The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die" (v.13). There would be painful consequences for David to bear, but he would be forgiven.

God longs to see people repent so He can shower forgiveness on them. But most folks are not like David. Most of us just cannot admit failure. We fear relinquishment of the control of our lives. Repentance conjures up concerns about loss of pleasure, success, or prestige.

David knew that his only hope was to cast himself on the mercy of God. Another time when he sinned, he was given a choice of three punishments. He could either be handed over to men, to the furies of nature, or into the hands of the living God. What did David choose? "Let us fall into the hands of the LORD, for His mercy is great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men" (2 Sam. 24:14). It is better to leave your fate in the hands of an angry God than in the hands of angry people.

Repentance might be hard at the moment, but it's always beneficial in the long run.

- ***Repentance involves our emotions.*** We must feel sorrow for our actions. "Blessed are those who mourn," Jesus said in Matthew 5:4. Many believe that Jesus was saying, "Blessed are those who mourn and grieve over their sins."
- ***Repentance involves our minds.*** We must proclaim our guilt to God after serious thought. This is no time for excuses. Rationalizing wastes time. Sin is sin. And it is sin against God Himself.
- ***Repentance involves our will.*** We must decide to stop what we're doing and resolve to correct the fault. We can't underestimate the power of our own will. It gets us into horrible trouble, and it can pull us out again (with the Holy Spirit's help).
- ***Repentance involves our bodies.*** Action is required. We must absolutely stop doing something. And usually a positive action is required to replace it.
- ***Repentance involves our spirit.*** Receiving the gift of God's grace should evoke a response of praise and thanksgiving. True repentance requires the use of every aspect of our beings. God deserves nothing less.

**God's Anger Remains Until It Accomplishes Its Purpose.** God's anger is not supposed to be the final state of our relationship with God. It has a function. It is a tool to achieve God's will.

The anger of the LORD will not turn back until He fully accomplishes the purposes of His heart. In days to come you will understand it clearly (Jer. 23:20).

God is not a moody, temperamental despot who will change His mind if we give Him some time. When God is angry, there is a problem that needs correction. His anger is not diminished until the situation is rectified.

Jonah fled from God's will and ran up against His anger. The sea grew rough and the big fish snapped. But down in the fish's belly, Jonah repented. From that point on, Jonah's condition improved.

The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. When Caleb and Joshua were the only two adults left of the original escapees from Egypt, only then were the Israelites allowed to enter the Promised Land. God's purpose in His anger had been accomplished.

Paul (who was also known as Saul) was blinded on his way to Damascus. Three days later, in an act of submission and humility before the very people he had come to arrest and imprison, Paul received his sight again. God's will had been done.

Many Christians believe that God is a permissive parent. They think that once they've joined God's family He will never be angry with them again. That would work if we never rebelled or disobeyed. And when we fail to repent, we find ourselves on the receiving end of God's anger and discipline.

It would be foolish to ignore the reality of God's anger. And it would be just as imprudent to think that His anger duplicates ours. God's anger is a tool for Him to use when we choose to ignore His grace, mercy, and love. And God's anger will never fail to accomplish the purpose for which He intended it.

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## **THE FUTURE DAY OF GOD'S WRATH**

The Bible is intricately woven together by dozens of central themes. Part of its majesty comes from the way at least 40 different authors living during a span of 1,600 years could weave such a united, cohesive history of God's work in this world. Most modern authors can't even do that well with a 200-page manuscript that they write by themselves.

One theme is that of a coming Messiah, vaguely hinted at in Genesis 3, and His triumphant victory in the book of Revelation. Then there is the intriguing peek into the spirit world with the fall of Satan, his dominion over the earth, and his prophesied doom. Throughout Scripture we find the topic of God's mighty love and concern for humankind, with its ultimate expression nailed to the cross on Calvary. But perhaps the most overlooked Bible theme in our present day is that of the coming day of God's anger, called the Day of Wrath.

Universal history is moving in a distinct direction. Life on earth is not static. We are going somewhere. All roads lead to the culmination of God's final fury. We can call this Judgment Day, or the Day of Reward, or even the Day of Justice. The New Testament calls it the Day of Wrath. It is foretold in Matthew 3:7 when John the Baptist chided the Pharisees and Sadducees for their phony religious actions. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" The wrath to come. God's final anger.

### **WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE COMING DAY OF WRATH?**

The New Testament closes in Revelation with a graphic portrayal of the enactment of God's anger. It is the birth pangs of a new era and the death knell for an old one. A person has to do some fancy theological sidestepping to ignore the truth about God's wrath. Jesus often warned His followers to be aware of the approaching of that day. Notice the flow of predicted world events that He lists in Matthew 24--25:

- False religious leaders (24:5).
- Political upheaval (v.6).
- Natural catastrophes (v.7).
- Severe testings for the faithful (v.9).
- Apostasy in the churches (v.10).
- Increase in ungodliness (v.12).
- Worldwide evangelization (v.14).
- Blasphemy of all that is holy (v.15).
- Severe tribulations (v.21).
- The earth-shattering return of the Lord (v.29).
- Exaltation of the faithful (v.31).
- Rejection of foolish unbelievers (25:12).
- Rewards for the faithful (v.21).
- Banishment, terror, and eternal condemnation for the wicked (v.30).

In all, it is one of the longest and most graphic sermons of Jesus ever recorded. And it's a detailed description of the coming Day of Wrath.

### **WHAT ARE THE RESPONSES TO THE COMING DAY OF WRATH?**

All the people of the earth will be affected by that day. No amount of economic or political power will help relieve the consequences: "Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains" (Rev. 6:15). And what were they hiding from? "Hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!" (v.16).

Revelation 6 describes that day by using the symbols of four horsemen. The rider of the white horse will conquer, the rider of the red one will take peace from the earth, the rider of the black one will bring famine, and the rider of the pale horse will bring death.

In Revelation 16, seven angels announce seven last plagues: painful sores, seas smitten, rivers devastated, scorching heat, darkness, widespread destruction, a fierce war against God, and God's final victory over evil. This will be a day when the earth shakes, islands and mountains disappear, cities collapse, and 100-pound hailstones flatten the earth.

Human limitations hamper the description of the Day of Wrath. You would think that every person on the face of the earth will tremble on that day. But they won't. Some will actually celebrate it with joy. It will be a great day for all who resisted evil in the face of ridicule, suffering, and death:

Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are His judgments. . . . Praise our God, all you His servants, you who fear Him, both small and great! . . . Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready (Rev. 19:1-2,5-7).

And who is the One to whom the faithful gather in the throne room to direct their praise? Who is the One who instigates the day that is so terrible and so glorious all at the same time? The King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus, the gentle Savior. Jesus, the lover of children. Jesus, the One who suffered without complaint. This very same Jesus will begin an eternal rule, not only in the hearts and lives of believers but over all the created universe as well.

Why is this one day so dreaded and yet so eagerly anticipated at the same time? Because the earth is populated with two kinds of people: those who choose to reject God's truth and those who accept it. It's easy to distinguish which group you belong to.

## **WHO SHOULD FEAR THE COMING DAY OF GOD'S WRATH?**

- **Those who refuse to believe in God's Son.** "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (Jn. 3:36).
- **Those who reject the limited revelation that all men receive from God in their conscious being.** "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them" (Rom. 1:18-19).
- **Those who stubbornly refuse to admit their sin or to change their ways.** "Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when His righteous judgment will be revealed" (Rom. 2:5).
- **Those who talk about religion in empty theories and deceptive words.** "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient" (Eph. 5:6).
- **Those who are filled with immorality, sensuality, and greed.** "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming" (Col. 3:5-6).
- **Those who do not know God nor respect the claims of His Son.** "He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (2 Th. 1:8).

The Day of Wrath for these will bring eternal separation from God's presence and glory, and the penalty of eternal torment:

They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of His power on the day He comes to be glorified in His holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed (2 Th. 1:9-10).

Just in case the message isn't clear enough, Revelation 14:10-11 gives more details: He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night.

## **WHO WON'T HAVE TO FEAR THE COMING DAY OF GOD'S WRATH?**

Scripture contains the glorious good news that not everyone will face the final day of God's wrath with fear and trembling. Through no good works of their own, but by God's saving power through Jesus Christ, some will face a different world to come.

At one time we were all headed toward condemnation. "All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath" (Eph. 2:3). But God, in His great mercy and love, provided a plan to deliver us from that just wrath. "God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Th. 5:9). This is made possible by the death of Christ on the cross. "Since we have now been justified by His blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through Him!" (Rom. 5:9).

Look at what awaits those who believe:

Because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages He might show the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:4-7).

All of those who accept Christ as Lord and Savior will find heaven to be a place where "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

"Fire-and-brimstone" sermons of a previous era have disappeared over the past 50 years. Many believe it's to the great benefit of all. But I wonder, where will people of our generation learn the truth of God's full nature? The warnings of old may have been crudely formed and sometimes insensitively delivered, but they served a vital purpose. No one within shouting distance was fooled into thinking everyone would end up in heaven. Even if they rejected the message, they knew they would someday face the full brunt of God's fury.

The message is biblical, critical, and urgent. Every person on this globe deserves to hear plainly, at least once as they pass through this life, about God's wrath.

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## **RESPONDING TO THE ANGER OF GOD**

If you've never accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, now is the time. The anger of God now, the Day of Wrath to come, and the eternal punishment in hell need not be a part of your life. The information in this booklet is not meant to scare you into an insincere decision. It is a clear, straight-up warning of what God has revealed about Himself and about the future. To fail to convey such knowledge to you would be a horrible omission and gross spiritual neglect.

But how about those of us who do believe? The topic of God's anger is not merely a theological discussion reserved for idle Sunday afternoons. There are at least five things such a study should motivate us to do.

**1. We should acknowledge that God's just anger is an absolutely necessary attribute of His personality.** We believe that justice takes place when people get exactly what they deserve. No more. No less. God's anger, both

now and in the Day of Wrath, is His confirmation that justice will be satisfied. God's anger is His determined action to punish sin. He is always fair. Every sin has a price. There are no discount sales on the way to the Pearly Gates. There would be no justice, now or in the world to come, in a world ruled by an angerless God.

**2. We must stand in reverential awe of God's power.** We must never forget who it is we are dealing with. You and I stand as merely one of many billions who have walked this planet. We are in a second-rate solar system in a galaxy that has millions of planets. Surrounding us, we are told, are innumerable other galaxies.

Yet, too often, we dare to blithely disobey God--the God who merely had to speak the word and those worlds were created. It is Jesus, whom many take lightly, who holds this creation together (Col. 1:17). We blindly play games of chance with One who knows our every thought before we utter it. We cannot hide from Him who knows every wart and blemish on our spirits and souls.

In spite of all this, God loves us deeply. Even as the crushing weight of God's just anger continues to roll closer with every year, He keeps calling us to life. When we look closely at His just anger, we should experience an overwhelming feeling of gratefulness.

**3. We should offer God more praise for His deliverance.** Two divergent dramas dominate the book of Revelation. On earth, the final tribulation will wreak plagues and havoc on those who choose to reject God's love. In heaven, mighty throngs will sing stirring waves of praise choruses to the Lord:

- Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come (Rev. 4:8).
- Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise! (Rev. 5:12).
- Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen! (Rev. 7:12).
- We give thanks to You, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because You have taken Your great power and have begun to reign. The nations were angry; and Your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding Your servants the prophets and Your saints and those who reverence Your name, both small and great--and for destroying those who destroy the earth (Rev. 11:17-18).

These are the songs of the soaring joy of justice fulfilled. It is the gratitude and relief of escape. Believers in Christ literally risk their lives on the certain hope of eternity based on the just plan of God. When that plan finally is carried to completion, rejoicing is in order.

We can begin that heavenly rejoicing with our earthly choruses. We can overflow with praise even now. God holds us tight and secure from the fury of His wrath, which our sinful nature deserves.

**4. We should be encouraged to rededicate our lives to God's service.** Are there things that you've felt you just had to do in response to someone? What about sending a thank-you note to a loved one for a gift? Or telling your mate you love him or her? Or smiling when someone surprises you with a compliment? What about shaking hands with a neighbor who offers friendship? Some situations demand a response.

A 2nd-grade girl slipped me a note before church. In her charming elementary-school style, she wrote how much I meant to her as her pastor. Now, I could have tossed this sentiment aside as if it was no big deal. But the truth is that I found myself wiping my eyes and stammering appreciation for an 8-year-old's kind affirmation. It was the type of action that demanded an active response.

So it is with God's love, mercy, and grace. If I felt compelled to respond to a young girl, how much more should I respond to the love offered to me from the heavenly Father? His work on my behalf should compel me to give myself to Him.

Rededicating ourselves to serve Him may sound something like this: "Lord, what can I say? I am speechless because I realize that I don't deserve to be accepted into Your presence. Yet, here I am, Lord. Like a child not knowing how to express what I'm feeling, I stammer--Lord, excuse me, but I just wanted to say--thanks! And one more thing: Is there anything I can do for You?" That's what rededication is all about.

**5. We should renew our enthusiasm to reach the lost.** True knowledge of God's anger should make evangelists out of us all. Everyone will face that wrath sooner or later--the natives in the bush, the millions in inland Asia, the folks in the inner cities, and the isolated cowboys who still ride the range. We need to talk about the Jesus who can deliver us from the consequence of God's just wrath. That means we need to talk to Uncle Jake, little Suzanne, and even crazy Eddie at work.

We are told, "Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear--hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh" (Jude 22--23).

Dwelling on God's anger doesn't have to be the focus of every thought, message, or testimony. But it should remain at the core of our motivation. We must demonstrate that we really do care about the eternal destiny of those around us.

One of my favorite spots to view the majesty of God's creation is Yosemite National Park in California. I am especially attracted to Glacier Point. From the tops of those cliffs I have an unobstructed view of such wonders as Half Dome, Nevada Falls, and the upper glacier valleys. From the edge of the cliff I can look straight down 3,000 feet to the Yosemite Valley floor.

But all along the edge of that sheer granite is a very practical device, a simple metal guardrail. It has an obvious purpose. One step beyond that rail could be fatal. There is no more exhilarating feeling than to stand at the rail's edge and drink in the vastness of the Sierra Nevada mountains. I don't feel in the least restricted or repressed. If I think of the rail at all, it is only to remember that someone cares about my safety.

To respect God's anger is to show consideration for the guardrail of our soul and spirit. We can know when we have stepped too close to the edge of eternal destruction. That fence of God's anger marks the boundaries of His love and mercy and grace.

Hanging on the guardrail at Glacier Point is a sign that reads, "Stay Behind the Rails." Once I leaned over as far as I could to see what was on the back of that sign. It was blank. There was no reason to put a message on the backside. Once you were there, it would be too late. You would have begun your fatal descent.

The warning about God's anger needs to be given now. We cannot wait until Judgment Day and then say to others, "Oh, didn't I tell you about this?"

It is a positive message we have to proclaim because there is still time to heed the warning. No one needs to experience God's anger. Jesus provides us with forgiveness and deliverance from God's just wrath to come.

Even though examining the nature of God's anger is not a popular topic, it remains critically important. Without that knowledge, our view of God, of life, and of eternity will be stunted.

Every true spiritual pilgrimage must include knowledge of God's righteous, loving anger. Then, and only then, will we be able to comprehend such words as *sin*, *repentance*, *blasphemy*, *justice*, and *hell*. And only with a proper view of God's anger can we truly appreciate the awe-inspiring sweetness of such terms as *mercy*, *grace*, *forgiveness*, and *love*.