

“Does God Have Anger Issues?”

Romans 1:16-23

Series: Wrestling with God Week 8: How Can God Be Full of Both Love and Wrath?

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Vacation time makes me think of car trips. I have beautiful memories of all four of us riding together on the ribbon of highway across this great land of ours. Lisa provided our entertainment by reading stories with a unique voice for each character. She's magnificent. It was wonderful to have all four of us in one place for an extended period of time with no other distractions. There was only one tiny little problem with our driving vacations: it made all four of us be in one place for an extended period of time with no other distractions. Sooner or later the inevitable would occur – a fight in the backseat. It's so predictable I can actually diagram it for the sake of scientific research:

1. It begins innocently. Peter and Kristin are laughing and enjoying each other's company.
2. Peter or Kristin crosses demilitarized zone between them.
3. First strike occurs – toy seized, body part tweaked, poked or tickled.
4. Cry heard round the world issued – “Ow!” “Stop touching me!” “Give it back!”
5. Counter strike launched - “Get off my side!” “You're going to get it!”
6. Appeal for Justice from Higher Court – “Mom, he's touching me!” “Dad, make her give it back!”
7. Dad goes ballistic – “Will you two knock it off. Don't make me stop this car.”
8. Peace restored, nuclear option averted.
9. In 50 miles cycle starts over again.

You know how you can train a dog to rollover when you ring a bell? This process was so predictable my kids trained me to respond automatically every time it started. So the minute the kids started laughing and enjoying each other's company I would yell, “Knock it off!” So yes, I'm guilty of road rage – against my kids.

Does God have anger issues? This week's wrestling match with God is one I'm often asked: Why does God seem so angry in the Old Testament and so loving in the New Testament? Some try to resolve this dilemma by saying there are two different Gods – one in the Old and a different in the New. This idea was first floated by a guy named Marcion in the 2nd Century A.D. The church rightly rejected this long ago. The Old and New Testaments are two halves of the same story. They belong together. For Jesus and the Apostles, the Old Testament was the only Bible they knew. More recently someone suggested to me that God had anger issues in the Old Testament but He got some therapy before the New Testament. Somehow I can't see God lying on a Psychologist's couch.

The truth is: God is loving in both Testaments. Norman Geisler, President of Southern Evangelical Seminary says,

I studied the word “love” and found it occurs 322 times in the Bible, about half in each testament. So you have the same emphasis on love in both.¹

You may be surprised to discover God’s wrath also appears in the New Testament. It begins with John the Baptist shouting to Sadducees and Pharisees,

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Matthew 3:7

And it ends with a Revelation to another John which includes this vision:

Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, “Go pour out the seven bowls of God’s wrath on the earth.” Revelation 16:1

So God expresses both wrath and love throughout the Bible. Our challenge is to understand how these two fit together.

God’s Wrath Results from His Holiness. The word “holy” appears 584 times in the Bible. Holy does not mean a halo. God is holy because He is pure and untainted by even the slightest stain of sin. Though God wants to save us and live with us, He cannot ignore our sin. It would be unjust for any Judge to ignore one who breaks the law.

Many today reject the image of God as a Judge who opposes sin. They prefer to see God as loving, comforting and forgiving – until something unjust happens to them. Miroslav Volf, a famous Christian theologian from Croatia, used to reject the concept of God’s wrath. He considered the image of an angry God as barbaric, completely unworthy of a God of love. But then his country, Yugoslavia, experienced a brutal war. People committed terrible atrocities against their neighbors and countrymen. That changed his mind about God’s wrath.

According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3,000,000 were displaced. My villages and cities were destroyed, my people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry. How did God react to the carnage? By doting on the perpetrators in a grandfatherly fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath but instead affirming the perpetrators’ basic goodness? Wasn’t God fiercely angry with them? Though I used to complain about the idea of God’s wrath, I came to rebel against a God who wasn’t wrathful at the sight of the world’s evil. God isn’t wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love.

¹ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, Zondervan, c. 2000, p. 165.

In our rush to speak of God's love and grace, we avoid any mention of God's righteous anger toward sin. In fact His holy presence wipes out sin just as light chases away darkness, fire consumes wood, bleach blots out stains.

The main reason God seems so harsh in the Old Testament is His holiness cannot live with our sin. That's why people in the Old Testament fear when God comes near. The phrase "Fear the Lord" appears 42 times in the Bible along with "Fear God" (21 times) and "Fear of the Lord (21 times). Why should we fear God? For the same reason we fear lightning, a raging fire and a nuclear mushroom cloud. If I maintain a policy of keeping a healthy distance from all these, should I not fear and tremble before the Lord who is more powerful than all these put together? I know I am stained with sin and His powerful holiness will wipe me out if I get near. Picture the end of Raiders of the Lost Ark and you get the idea. You don't play around with a holy God.

To convey this idea, C.S. Lewis chose a Lion named Aslan to symbolize Christ in his Chronicles of Narnia. The four children in the *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* are shocked when they hear the coming Savior is a lion.

Aslan is a lion- the Lion, the great Lion." "Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he- quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion"... "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver ... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."²

Though God's wrath, His holy anger against our sin may make us uncomfortable, the more you understand the reality of God's wrath, the deeper you will appreciate His goodness and love.

God's Wrath is Swallowed Up By God's Love. Every sin down through the ages is an act of rebellion and rejection of God's rule. This created a great misunderstanding. Over time we came to view his just opposition to our sin as His anger against us. We see Him as a grouchy old man who is out to get us. I used this illustration recently in another sermon but it fits well here as well. Remember "Old Man" Marley in the movie *Home Alone*? Kevin McCallister is home alone and scared of his neighbor who is rumored to have murdered his family with a snow shovel in 1958. Later, Kevin meets Old Man Marley and discovers the rumors are false. He is actually gentle and kind. In fact, Mr. Marley is the one who eventually saves Kevin from the real thieves. Where do Kevin and Mr. Marley meet? Where is the real Mr. Marley revealed? In church on Christmas Eve – the celebration of the birth of God's Son.

God is not a grouchy next door neighbor. The God of the Old Testament shows up in person in Jesus. Through the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus we discover the holy God who opposes sin is gentle, kind and gracious to us. He is a God who will go to any lengths to save us from the real threats and thieves – our sin and selfish. For when He appears in the flesh, He does an amazing thing: He takes all the anger and wrath upon Himself. The wrath of God we justly deserve falls on Jesus. It is swallowed up at the Cross.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, (

And in so doing, Jesus satisfies all the demands of the Law. Because Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath for us, we can live with our holy God without fear, we can receive the promise of eternal life if we put our faith in Him.

So in reply to the question: why does God seem so angry in the Old Testament? My simple answer is that our picture of God is not complete until we get to the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God's true character is still a little fuzzy and out of focus. When we look back at God through the lens of Jesus, He brings the image of God into perfect focus. We discover the God who seemed like a harsh Judge to the Israelites turns out to be the Savior who takes the curse for the Israelites and us.

This is what Paul says in his letter to the Romans. He declares, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Romans 1:16). The word 'Gospel' means 'Good News.' But before Paul can tell you the 'Good News', he spends 1:18-3:20 telling you the bad news. You can't appreciate the Good News about Jesus until you hear the bad news about us. Paul shows how the Wrath God relates to the Love of God. He writes,

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth" (Romans 1:18).

God is angry when we choose to follow other lords and gods.

They "exchange the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal human beings and birds and animals and reptiles. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen" (Romans 1:23, 25).

In every age we humans display an addiction to idolatry. We prefer to worship creatures and images of creatures rather than our Creator. In the western world, the idols and images are less obvious but just as influential. We might worship the Almighty Dollar, a career, food, the latest fashion, the bottle or vial. We may even worship ourselves. If you want to know what your idol is, ask yourself, honestly, 'What do you place above all other things? For what are you willing to make sacrifices?' "What gets a large share of your money, time, energy and attention? Here's the funny thing about idols: we think we have them under control but they control us. Our love for idols even spreads poison to others.

Recently I had an infestation of ants in the kitchen. The only thing I found that works is an ant trap which I place it on the window sill. The ants are attracted to the bait and many of them die in the trap. Yet the trap is effective because ants take the poison back to the nest and share it. Now please understand – in this illustration, I am playing the role of Satan. I set out the idolatry and the ants are so hungry for it they not only consume it, they share it with others.

Do you see why idolatry makes the one True God angry? It's destroying His people and spreading poison across the globe. Yet God, in love, does not force us to obey Him.

Instead of smiting us with lightning bolts or plagues, He simply gives us what we want. He lets us have our way. In the same way, Paul states three times,

God gave them up to the sinful desires of their hearts. God gave them over to shameful lusts. God gave them up to a depraved mind, to things that should not be done” (Romans 1:24, 26, 28).

When an idol takes God’s place in your heart, God calls you to return to Him, He warns you of the danger, but He also lets you have your heart’s desire. The result is a society plagued with immorality, envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice, gossip, slander, arrogance, boasting, rejection of God. We become senseless, faithless, heartless, and ruthless (see Romans 1:29-31). If you think Paul is exaggerating, just watch the internet. Paul’s description of his day could be said of our own.

What shall we conclude then? Are we (Jews) any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” Therefore no one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law; Rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. (Romans 3:9-12, 20).

Why does Paul give us such bad news? To drive us to despair? No. To drive us to our knees so we will throw out the idols and throw ourselves on the mercy of the Judge. For this Judge is merciful. This Judge is gracious. And when the sentence is passed on us and we are found guilty, this Judge takes our punishment, takes our place, pays our price.

A story is told about Fiorello LaGuardia, who was mayor of New York City during the worst days of the Great Depression and all of WWII. At only five foot two, he was a colorful character who used to ride the New York City fire trucks, take entire orphanages to baseball games, and when the New York newspapers went on strike, he read the Sunday funnies to the kids over the radio.

One bitterly cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia asked the judge for the evening if he could take the bench. Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia her daughter's husband deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges. "It's a real bad neighborhood, your Honor," the man told the mayor. "She's got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson." LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions--ten dollars or ten days in jail." But after he pronounced sentence, the mayor did a funny thing. Reaching into his pocket, he extracted a bill and tossed it into his famous sombrero saying: "Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff,

collect the fines and give them to the defendant." So the following day the New York City newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered old lady who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren, fifty cents of that amount being contributed by the red-faced grocery store owner. Some seventy petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York City policemen, each of whom had just paid fifty cents, gave the mayor a standing ovation."³

All of us have sinned.

Thank God we have a Judge who is willing to pay the price.

³ Brennan Manning, *The Ragmuffin Gospel*, Multnomah, 1990, pp. 91-2