

**ABOUT THIS BOOK . . .** These are days when God's love is much spoken about, but to say that God has wrath or can be wrathful is taboo in many pulpits and pews. The idea of divine wrath is relegated to ages when people believed in a grim and judgmental God, and not in the splendidly loving God we have discovered in this more liberal day. The writer is not out simply to defend the idea of God having wrath, but to break through superficial thinking on the subject to show that unless we understand God's wrath we will never really arrive at His love. Peter Forsyth once said, 'Nothing will satisfy the conscience of man, which does not first satisfy the conscience of God'. A person with a purified conscience is a happy person. God's wrath is against that which maims and demeans humanity. The God of long-suffering does not have a short fuse. His wrath is not 'off the cuff'.

It always presses on in the interests of love and a peaceful conscience for the human race.

*The Wrath of His Love* is an important book. It is a small book which deals with a large principle. It will be worth the attention it demands. For some it will be the discovery of God's love.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .** Octogenarian Geoffrey Bingham has had years of Christian learning and teaching in many countries. These days his new books are always vintage writing. Once Principal of two Bible Colleges and leader for almost thirty years in New Creation Teaching Ministry, he is tirelessly occupied with the Scriptures, constantly learning them and teaching them. His life is rooted in his own substantial family, in the human community, and in the rough and tumble of contemporary living and so he is able to speak to these things through books such as this.



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# *the* **WRATH** *of* **HIS LOVE**

*Studies in the*

*Wrath of God*

*and of Man*

**GEOFFREY C. BINGHAM**

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*The Things We Firmly Believe*

*The Magnificence of Mercy*

*Ah, Strong, Strong Love*

*The Everlasting Presence*

*Great and Glorious Grace*

*The Wounding and the Healing*

*Oh, Father! Our Father!*

*All Things Are Yours*

*Christ's Cross over Man's Abyss*

# THE WRATH OF HIS LOVE

Studies in the Wrath of God and Man

GEOFFREY C. BINGHAM

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# The Wrath of His Love

## INTRODUCTION TO THE IDEA OF GOD'S WRATH

The idea of God having wrath is not an easy one to absorb and understand. It is clear from Scripture that it speaks of such a thing as the wrath of God. That idea is shocking to people such as humanists and to those who have decided that God as displayed in the Old Testament cannot be the One who is spoken of in the New Testament. Just to say that God in the New Testament is kindly and loving in contradistinction to the Deity of the Old Testament is to banish this God who seems to break out into rages against His people Israel and many of the nations, and appears to have set a judgment day at the close of history, 'the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed' (Rom. 2:5).

Approaching the subject of God's wrath—if we assume for the sake of discussion that there is a wrath of God—is not an easy matter, especially if we are working from the text of the whole Bible. The New Testament has as graphic pictures of God's wrath as there are in the Old Testament. We need, then, to observe a few helpful rules in order to make sense of the subject. The first is that we should not be seeing God's wrath as anthropomorphic. By this we mean that we should not use

human wrath as an analogy of Divine wrath, picturing it as a kind of enlarged human wrath. There is little about human wrath which is attractive, for it is often expressed in violence, in irrational modes, and is generally quite dangerous since it is not the wrath of righteous persons. If it is the expression of self-righteousness, self-justification or the operation of a 'bleeding heart', that is, anger at what seems to be injustice, then it is, itself, to be feared, for over history so much homicide has resulted from these irrational attitudes. The sight of a person in rage can be quite chilling. No wonder we shudder at the idea of wrath or anger and, if we see God's wrath to be of this ilk, of course we will refuse to believe the God who is love has anger, this kind of rage. Certainly His wrath is not an uncontrollable fury such as we see in human rage. Sadly enough the words 'anger', 'rage', 'wrath' and 'fury', which are often used of God's wrath in the Bible, are wrongly interpreted so that we think He is virtually irrational.

Another rule for understanding Divine wrath is to see God is essentially love, and not essentially wrath. If this revelation should ever come to us, it will be breathtaking, for to know that God is love is to know Him personally (1 John 4:8, 16) and to live in Him as love. Even so, the Scriptures depict God as having wrath. If we read the text closely, we will see that God is provoked *to* wrath rather than *is* wrath. This is by no means a quibble over words. Most of us would agree that Paul's 'Be angry but do not sin' has a depth of sensible meaning. Call it indignation if we will, but we disapprove of certain despicable, cowardly and evil forms of conduct.

Hence we have judges, judgments, courts and war-crimes trials. We do not think this sensitivity to wrong thinking and wrong action to be a bad thing. Indeed that kind of ethical wrath helps to keep society to some degree in check. This rule, then, should help us to see that there can be a hatred of evil on God's part which is the expression of a wholesome moral mind. The more one loves—so to speak—the more one will disapprove of unloving and impure action. We need to be careful that righteous indignation does not pass over to self-righteous indignation which is the heart of hypocrisy.

Probably none of this advice will be taken by those who have a hateful dread of Divine wrath. Experiences of irrational human anger in childhood will certainly give us bad images of any kind of wrath, be it Divine or human. It will need a view of God as essentially love, and His use of retributive and juridical judgments to be seen as the actions not of Divine irrationality but of His love. We need to be able to speak of 'the wrath which comes from love'. Indeed we will speak of this in this present study. Surely we recognise that sometimes in us there is anger which springs from love and not venom. We must credit God with that kind of love.

I would like to add here a quote from *Guilt: Its Meaning and Significance* by John G. McKenzie, where he also makes reference to other theologians on the matter of God's wrath in a section titled 'The Meaning of "Wrath of God"':

Various theories have been expounded to get round the idea of attributing one of the 'deadly' sins to God. Father Danielou rightly notes that 'Any modern child

may learn from his catechism that anger is a sin: so it is no wonder if he is shocked to hear of it in God'. He adds: 'There is hardly anything in the terminology of religion that gives more offence to the pious (or prudish) ears of the modern world than this expression, the wrath of God. It was already something of an embarrassment to the Alexandrian Jews, who attempted, in discussion with the Greek philosophers, to water it down. In our own day, Simone Weil, for example, finds it simply intolerable: for she, like Marcion of old, contrasts the New Testament God of love with an Old Testament God of Wrath. Unfortunately for the position, there is love in the Old Testament, and there is wrath in the New—as Tertullian pointed out long ago. We have to reckon, whether we like it or not, with wrath as one of the divine attributes: and, what is more, for all its anthropomorphic appearance, this particular word may carry a stronger charge of mystical significance than any other, and afford the deepest insight into the meaning of the divine transcendence.'

He quotes Peguy [*The Lord of History*, pp. 154f.] to the effect that 'Wrath is the emotional response of a sound personality to anything vile, low and mean'. His own conclusion is 'that the innermost kernel of this idea of the wrath of God would be simply a mark of the intensity of his being, and the irresistible force with which his power may be manifested in creation, when he is pleased to give a violent reminder of his existence to a world [which] steadfastly turns away from him.

'Wrath, so understood, is purged of every connotation of pettiness, meaning simply that intensity of existence which nothing whatever can withstand. It is a precious conception.'<sup>1</sup>

Other useful understandings and statements in much the same vein are:

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<sup>1</sup> John G. McKenzie, *Guilt: Its Meaning and Significance*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1962, pp. 150–151.

But His wrath must not be regarded as something which has to be 'propitiated', and so changed into love and mercy, but rather as being identical with the consuming fire of inexorable divine love in relation to our sins.<sup>2</sup>

P. T. Forsyth often gives expression to such a thought, as when he says of the love of God: 'It has been detached from the idea of propitiation with which the Apostles identify it (I John iv. 10), and regarded as an infinite dilation of human affection (where the real revelation is held to be). Judgment is viewed but as a device of the Father instead of a constituent of His Fatherhood as holy. Little wonder then that love has gone thin in the expansion and lost power. It has ceased in the process to be understood as Holy Love.'<sup>3</sup>

All that we can now say is that, when it is the Eternal Son who offers Himself without spot to the Eternal Father, the ethical objection to a propitiatory sacrifice vanishes.<sup>4</sup>

Those who object to the conception of the wrath of God should realize that what is meant is not some irrational passion bursting forth uncontrollably, but a burning zeal for the right coupled with a perfect hatred for everything that is evil.<sup>5</sup>

These quotes lift discussion on the wrath of God from argumentation as to whether God has wrath

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<sup>2</sup> D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ*, Faber and Faber, London, 1968.

<sup>3</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, London, 1948, pp. 85f., quoted by Leon Morris in *The Apostolic Teaching of the Cross*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1982, p. 210, n. 2.

<sup>4</sup> J. G. Simpson, *What Is the Gospel?* London, 1914, p. 192, quoted by Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Teaching of the Cross*, p. 211, n. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, p. 209.

or not, or should have it or not, to a higher plane. Particularly is this seen in that part of the quote from *Guilt: Its Meaning and Significance* by John G. McKenzie which says:

We have to reckon, whether we like it or not, with wrath as one of the divine attributes:<sup>6</sup> and, what is more, for all its anthropomorphic appearance, this particular word may carry a stronger charge of mystical significance than any other, and afford the deepest insight into the meaning of the divine transcendence.<sup>7</sup>

The magnitude of evil's evil requires God to move in righteous anger, that is, holy wrath.

### **THE WRATH OF GOD AS WE SEE IT IN SCRIPTURE**

Anyone who has read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation will agree that whatever the wrath of God may be in essence, it is certainly spoken of plentifully in both Testaments. They will also agree that Divine wrath is of great significance, even if they cannot agree with the ideas which seem to be put forth regarding it. If God is essentially love (1 John 4:8, 16), then wrath must be part of love—as we could deduce from 1 John 4:9–10 where propitiation is mentioned—but we will return to this

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<sup>6</sup> Readers will note that I do not refer to God's wrath as one of His attributes since it is not wrath in the same sense that He is love, holiness, righteousness, goodness and truth, but rather He has to be provoked to wrath when any of His attributes are attacked by evil.

<sup>7</sup> McKenzie, *Guilt*, p. 150.

idea later in our study. I think we need to understand the end or goal of God's wrath; that is, what it is always working for and I think it will be seen to cover the following: (i) God's concern for His whole creation, and His intention to preserve it from destruction by evil powers and the dangers of human sinfulness. This is a key to certain of His actions which we call 'wrath'. Someone has put it, 'the maintenance of the creation law order which demands justice';<sup>8</sup> and (ii) retribution to those powers and persons who act wickedly (Rom. 1:18ff.; 2:5). Justice is thus seen to be operating from God; and (iii) God's wrath is active in ensuring that His plan for all creation is not impeded. Those who attack it and seek to divert creation and its creatures terrestrial and celestial will have the wrath of God upon them. If these three elements are operating, then wrath is not only justified but also required. Thus we see the wrath of God is never a release of fury, which is arbitrary and irrational, but the exercise of authority and judgment which ensures justice and rightness in all things. Put another way, it is His implacable opposition to evil in all its forms and His unswerving intention to destroy it. Nor is it, as some fearful and morbid minds conceive it to be, the unseen, brooding darkness of a god who cannot tolerate the creation he has made, and has malignant designs upon it.

The wrath of God is mentioned some hundreds of times in the Old Testament, and proportionately much the same in the New Testament. A trip

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<sup>8</sup> *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 5, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1974, p. 991.

through a concordance under the words ‘wrath’, ‘anger’, ‘fury’ and associated synonyms, will soon show us that the anger of God in the Old Testament has to be accepted as a fact of His actions, whether we can agree with it or not. Likewise in the New Testament. It is also to be seen as personal and not impersonal action on God’s part. One example of this is:

Now I will soon pour out my wrath upon you, and spend my anger against you, and judge you according to your ways; and I will punish you for all your abominations. And my eye will not spare, nor will I have pity; I will punish you according to your ways, while your abominations are in your midst. Then you will know that I am the LORD, who smite (Ezek. 7:8–9).

Psalm 7:11 (NIV) has, ‘God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day’. Wrath is not to be seen simply and only as the harm and suffering that comes to one who goes contrary to the natural order of creation and morality. This is a mechanistic view of God’s wrath which, we repeat, is personal. All humans live and move and have their being in God and they cannot escape His proper, personal wrath.

If we hold to the view that God created Man within His ‘Everlasting Covenant’, then all sin is covenant breaking and God punishes such.<sup>9</sup> In the

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<sup>9</sup> The covenant is ‘the everlasting covenant’ and there are good grounds for believing Man was created in covenant and this means God has personal relationships with all human beings, as also with the entire creation. This is well set out in *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenantal Theology* by Bill Dumbrell (Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1984).

case of the everlasting covenant the first couple rebel against God and receive due punishment in the curse. Paul informs us from two references that in history God had temporarily passed over sin (Acts 17:30; Rom. 3:25–26), but that this seeming passing over of sin had eventually to be dealt with by the sacrifice of Christ (Rom. 3:23–26). If we hold that covenant began at the time of the Flood and then broadened out in God’s covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3; et al) then we will see His wrath in action with those who became His special covenant people, Israel, when they sinned. To give ourselves an overall view of what we call God’s wrath we will set out the various aspects of it immediately below and then seek to find the essence of the meaning of it.

### **Nations and Their Rulers Become Subject to God’s Wrath**

An early example of His wrath is the Flood, although it is not attributed specifically to that wrath. Its happening is certainly attributed to human sin and corruption. Another example is seen in Genesis 19:24–25 when the Lord reigned fire and brimstone from heaven on Sodom and Gomorrah.

Psalm 2 is a good example. Here the nations and the peoples plot against God who ‘has them in derision’. ‘Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying . . . serve the LORD with fear, with trembling kiss his feet, lest he be angry and you perish in the way; for his wrath is

quickly kindled'.<sup>10</sup> In Psalm 110:5–6 is another account of God's wrath on the nations:

*The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter chiefs over the wide earth.*

Other examples are:

- Isaiah 10:12–19, the oracle against Assyria;
- Isaiah 13:1 – 14:32, the oracle against Babylon;
- Isaiah 15:1 – 16:14, the oracle against Moab—and so on.

God, as we see in Isaiah, does not forget the sin of these nations in attacking His covenant people, and His wrath will effect retribution. This is the principle—that God will not forget the nations who seek to destroy His chosen people. It is true that God warns Nineveh or it, too, would be destroyed. In wrath God remembers mercy (Hab. 3:2). Malachi 1:5 includes Edom in the retributive judgment of God. No less and indeed even more is His wrath upon Israel for its apostasy. The prophets point this out, none less than Amos.

What is food for thought is whether the rise and fall of nations are not wrought with God's wrath in view. It appears that in history nothing that is evil will be overlooked but all of it will bring the nemesis which comes in provoking God's wrath. We need to sift out the sayings regarding God's wrath so that

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<sup>10</sup> Parts of this Psalm are quoted many times in the New Testament, and the Psalm appears to be the framework for much apostolic thinking regarding God's battle with the nations, and His victory over them.

we recognise that His judgments and the action of wrath are provoked by the nations' attacks upon God, especially as we see them described in Psalm 2. We must remember that the pagan gods and lords, the religious deities and worship practices were often directed against the true God, the Creator of the world and the Lord of all history. In Psalm 1 we see the blessedness of the man 'who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners'. The inference is that such as do seek the counsel of the wicked and stand in the way of sinners are accursed, and the curse of God has to do with the wrath of God. In this sense Man can know what will provoke wrath and what will bring blessing.

#### **Mankind in General Feels God's Wrath for Various Reasons**

Here we see the curses upon Adam, upon Cain, by the Flood, upon the builders of Babel. In Psalm 90:7–10 the reason for wrath is given:

*For we are consumed by thy anger;  
by thy wrath we are overwhelmed.  
Thou hast set our iniquities before thee,  
our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.  
For all our days pass away under thy wrath,  
our years come to an end like a sigh.  
The years of our life are threescore and ten,  
or even by reason of strength fourscore;  
yet their span is but toil and trouble;  
they are soon gone, and we fly away.*

Ecclesiastes 5:6 says 'Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that

it was a mistake; why should God be angry at your voice, and destroy the work of your hands?' This recalls the God who is angry with the sinner every day of Psalm 7:11. In fact Man generally is regarded as he is made by God and as he is responsible to act properly before Him. We begin to see that wrath involves judgment and retribution, but is not that itself.

### **The Creation Is Involved in the Wrath of God**

God is never wrathful *at* His creation, as such, if by creation we understand what most people call—erroneously—'Nature'. Man is part of creation, but when we think of what animal, vegetable, and mineral 'kingdoms' are then we understand that by them God shows his wrath to mankind and all thinking creatures. A good example of this is Deuteronomy 32:15–27 and especially verse 22: 'For a fire is kindled by my anger, and it burns to the depths of Sheol, devours the earth and its increase, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains'. We always see that this part of creation is on God's side. It has no rebellion in it, but it is prepared to be used by God for His actions of wrath. So Isaiah 13:9, 'Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it'. See also Isaiah 50:2, Jeremiah 10:10, and Malachi 3:11. Isaiah 24 is a chapter depicting God's wrath in stark manner. Romans 8:18ff. show the yearning of the creation to be freed from its 'bondage to decay' and its being 'subjected to futility' so that it might be released into 'the liberty

of the glory of the children of God' and be part of the new heaven and the new earth—the purified, glorified creation of love.

### **Israel Experiences the Wrath of God as His Covenant People**

The first and most powerful example of this is when Israel makes the golden calf and ascribes the deliverance from Egypt to it and not to God. So Exodus 32:9–11 (cf. Deut. 9:7–8):

*And the LORD said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people; now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; but of you I will make a great nation.' But Moses besought the LORD his God, and said, 'O LORD, why does thy wrath burn hot against thy people, whom thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?'*

In all cases Israel is said to provoke God to wrath. Its reprehensible apostasy and perverse idolatries provoked God to anger and wrathful punishment. In it all God was not enraged to the point of irrational judgments and punishments but was One who acted righteously, often after substantial periods of long-suffering. So Psalm 74:1; Isaiah 47:6; Lamentations 2:1; Ezekiel 5:15; and Daniel 9:16. Much of the text of the Old Testament is taken up with the history of Israel and much of this history is related to the nation's idolatry which brought down the wrath of God upon it. Its punishment was often that the land was made desolate, for example, Isaiah chapter 24, and in the extreme of judgment the people were exiled. The prophets are

vociferous about this. They warn the nation, and they do not attempt to justify God in His wrath. It is self-evident that the nation of Israel has deserved the wrath of God. Always against Israel is the breaking of the mandate God gave her; that is, to be 'my own possession among all peoples . . . a kingdom of priests and a holy nation'; that is, to be the holy nation *among* all unholy nations, the priest nation *for* all nations, and to show the truth of the God who was above all gods and lords and idols. Disobedience to the creational mandate of Genesis 1:28–30 was the greatest provocation of God's wrath.

What is generally missed in discussion regarding God and how it could be that One who is love could possibly have wrath is the fact of God's creational covenant with Man, His mandate for the life and work of the human race, the plan that He has in mind, which has to do with the goal He has for creation. Adam's sin brought death into the world and is deeply reprehensible. The great grace of the Abrahamic covenant is sinned against when those within this covenant break it. Whilst the covenant is not a contract, nevertheless the people are warned against breaking it, for this is rejecting not only God's purpose for creation, but also the act of God's redemption, and this is the deepest sin against God, 'the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour'. Covenant is soteriological as well as being the basis of true community. It is by covenant that the human community exists and has its being as the image of the Divine Community, that is, the Trinity. Man, made in the image of God, covenants union with God and obedience to Him, which

involves holiness, righteousness, goodness, truth and love as given elements which must flow into the whole society of Man from the Triune God, Himself. 'Keep your heart with all diligence; for from it flow the springs of life' (Prov. 4:23), is the principle of true, human living. God's anger is on Man when he refuses to flow out these beautiful, moral issues and when his heart becomes 'a muddied stream or a polluted fountain' (Prov. 25:26), and thus negates God's flow into the human race. Doubtless it is by grace that God effects His plan in spite of Satan and human opposition.

In Israel, God is provoked by the nation. Some sixty times in the Old Testament this word is used of Israel in its dealings with God, but it brings out the important point that God never needs to be urged so that He will exercise His properties of holiness, righteousness, goodness, love and truth. It is accepted that this is the way God works naturally. Were there no provocation from human evil in opposition to Him then there would be no anger on His part. His steadfast love and His loving kindness mean He is not given chronically to anger. Paul's words to his fellow Jews in Romans 2:3–5 shows the patience and kindness of God, even in the situation of provocation:

Do you suppose, O man, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

This is pure teaching on the wrath of God from the Old Testament. All of this has to do with the Covenant God—Yahweh—and the covenant people, Israel.

### **All Humanity—Jew and Gentile—Is Involved in the Matter of God's Wrath**

Now we seek to see that Israel and all the nations are, together, involved in the wrath of God. Whereas Israel had the privilege of being God's holy nation, God does not have different 'rules' for Israel and the Gentiles. In Ephesians 2:1ff. Paul speaks of the state of (i) the Gentiles; and (ii) the Jews. We can see this in the text:

*And you [Gentiles] he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. Among these we [i.e. 'we Jews' or 'we all'] once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.*

'Were by nature children of wrath' does not mean 'by creation children of wrath', for Man was created 'in true righteousness and holiness' (Eph. 4:24).<sup>11</sup> Paul is saying that God's wrath has to do with all mankind who, in Adam, believed the word of the

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<sup>11</sup> Paul in this context is talking about those recreated through the Spirit but it is permissible, and even mandatory that we recognise the recreation is after the order of the original creation.

serpent rather than the word of God.<sup>12</sup> Romans 1:18 tells us that 'the wrath of God is [being] revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth'. For the moment we will not deal with this text and context, but use it simply to show that God displays His wrath universally. We need to keep in mind that all people in Adam have refused the commission God gave to Man at creation, and so Man—as the whole of Adamic humanity—is under wrath in this sense. The deliberate insistence of Man upon continuing in this way and then the personal development of wickedness and unrighteousness by persons serves to keep alive the action of God's wrath throughout humanity. If by one man sin entered into this world and death by sin (Rom. 5:12), then God's wrath upon all mankind is appropriate. We say this in the face of those who would claim that God just shouldn't be wrathful for it is in His nature and ability not to be wrathful. I believe we shall see that it is appropriate for God to be wrathful, and that being wrathful is consistent with His nature, that is, with His being love and redeeming the objects of His wrath—sinners.

### **THE WORKING OF GOD'S WRATH**

We have said, but have not yet shown, that God is not wrath but love, so that when He is wrathful it

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<sup>12</sup> The serpent of Genesis 3 is the one referred to in Revelation 12:9, 'And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan'.

is because He has been *provoked* to this because of the sin of persons and nations. As we have indicated, the action of His wrath is always appropriate to the action and occasion of evil done by sinful persons, nations and evil powers. The wrath must be described as a holy wrath,<sup>13</sup> for holiness abhors evil, but primarily God's wrath is against unrighteousness, that is, the breaking of His law. Transgression of the law is called unrighteousness, and it is against unrighteousness that God's wrath acts (Rom. 1:18). There is no righteousness but God's for it is of His essence. Human righteousness derives from God upon whom Man is contingent as he was created in the image of God.

At this point we need to take up some objections which have surfaced over the years and still persist when arguing against God's wrath being upon sinners. It is argued that God's wrath is not against sinners but against sin. It is then argued that God's wrath is not upon sinners but upon their sin. This is not wholly the case. We should read Romans 1:18 very carefully: 'For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven *against* all *ungodliness* and *wickedness* of men who by their *wickedness* suppress the truth'. The word 'ungodliness' (Gk. *asebeia*) means 'impiety' or 'ungodliness' or 'wickedness'. 'Wickedness' (Gk. *adikia*) means 'injustice', 'wrong', 'iniquity', 'falsehood', 'deceitfulness', in fact all kinds of unrighteousness. Living in ungodliness and wickedness is the act of suppressing the truth, which is the opposite of the truth. God who is both

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<sup>13</sup> By nature of the case sinful humanity cannot understand the nature of holy wrath.

holy and righteous pours out his wrath *on those* who do such things. As we have suggested, one modern idea is that His wrath is simply spent against the sins, but not the sinner. W. White in his article 'Wrath' makes the following comment:

In the 19th century it was characteristic of the scholastic systematics of the time to make a spurious distinction between the sinner and his sinful act, and to then assume that the very real wrath of God was only vented upon the abstract notion of the sinner's sin. The OT is clear, however, that iniquity does not exist apart from the iniquitous acts of the wicked. The judgment is therefore leveled upon the wicked creature. This is why the means and ends of God's wrath often take the form of war and carnage. These distinctly human forms of violence and bloodshed are used for God's glory. The general evolutionary humanism of the late 19th and 20th centuries has found this Biblical concept cruel and unacceptable, but its essential truth is seen in the course not only of Biblical but also post-Biblical history.<sup>14</sup>

It was a 19th century commentator, F. Godet, a scholar still highly respected and quoted, who in commenting on Romans 1:18 said:

From the notion of *wrath*, when it is applied to God, we must of course remove all that pollutes human wrath, personal resentment, the moral perturbation which gives to the manifestations of indignation the character of revenge. In God, who is the living *Good*, wrath appears as the holy disapprobation of evil, and the firm resolve to destroy it. But it is false to say, as is often done, that this divine emotion applies only to the evil

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<sup>14</sup> *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 5.

and not the evil-doer. In measure as the latter ceases to oppose the evil and voluntarily identifies himself with it, he himself becomes the object of wrath and all its consequences.<sup>15</sup>

So, then, the modern saying, 'God hates the sin but loves the sinner' is simply not true. Sin is done from the will of the sinner and it is the action of the sinner which God hates and He does not separate what is done from the doer. Evil is always and only ever *personal*. John the Apostle said, 'the devil has sinned from the beginning'. This was in the context of saying, 'Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness', and this is the sticking point for some. If it be said that Christ came to take the punishment and to bear the wrath of God then the outcry is, 'You have a legal model of God. You are talking in legal terms.' It would be better if these folk were to use the term 'legalistic' instead of 'legal', for by opposing what they call a legal model, they cut off any action of the Cross which deals with Man's actual guilt. They also ignore the fact that the law of God, rightly understood and practiced, is 'perfect, reviving the soul' (Ps. 19:7, *ESV, NRSV*). They deny that Christ made an atonement for sins on the basis of the guilt of sins which, as we will see, is the wrath of God, but then wrath as related to His own law. They say this sets up an unacceptable dichotomy in God—that is, that on the one hand of God there is His love, mercy and grace, and on the other hand there is His holiness, justice and wrath—and they suggest that this poses an insoluble

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<sup>15</sup> F. Godet, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1969, pp. 99–100.

dilemma. As we shall see, far from being an insoluble dilemma, it is the love of God in wrath which acts to take away the guilt of the sinner and sets him free, as Christ had promised he would do in John 8:31–36.

We have seen that the wrath of God is a legal matter, no less than it is a matter of His essential holiness, righteousness, goodness, truth and love. It has very much to do with Man's transgression of God's law. Some loose thinking is heard concerning God's law, as though it were a dull matter, and that Christ came to relieve us of having to be obedient to it. Supposedly it was ever a strangulating legalistic demand that the law made upon us, and grace has freed us from this kind of oppression! Wrong! The law of God is the law which is the very transcript of God Himself. J. A. Motyer has said, 'Man is the living, personal image of God; the law is the written, preceptual image of God . . . The Lord longs for his people to live in his image, and to that end he has given them his law.'<sup>16</sup>

When we see that the law is the law *of* God before it is the law *from* God, so that God subsists by His own law and it is the only way for a human to live because this is the action of being in God's image, then we will be less hasty in talking about law as though it were just a thing to keep sinners tied to legal demands, and we would begin to understand that every infraction of the law is violation of the very nature of God and, for that matter, of

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<sup>16</sup> J. A. Motyer, 'Law, Biblical concept of, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W. A. Elwell, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1984, p. 624.

Man's created nature also.<sup>17</sup> This realisation will then be an introduction to knowing the fearful nature of human guilt. It has been said that nothing will satisfy the conscience of Man which does not first satisfy the conscience of God. We can see that violations of God's holy and loving Being are the very nature of sin. By nature of the case, nothing we can do will make the matter right. If the conscience is not cleansed by the death of the Cross, then it will forever accuse us of our sins. It will be there for all eternity. Even if God were to issue a fiat—which He does not—that all sins are forgiven, this would not satisfy the conscience. No amount of punitive suffering of Christ on the Cross could let us off the hook of conscience's accusation. Telling us not to worry about our guilt would not lessen the guilt one iota nor would it free us from the domination of guilt. It is by accusation that the powers of darkness work their oppression over us. The Devil is said to accuse the saints day and night before our God, but the saints are said to overcome him by the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 12:10–11), that is, the death of the Cross. No: God's wrath would be forever on us by reason of our guilt if that guilt is not dealt with at the Cross, which of course it is. How it is dealt with, we will shortly see.

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<sup>17</sup> This is a good point at which to show that the measure of a person—and indeed the whole of community of Man—is that he obeys God's original commission of Genesis 1:28–30 as being partner with God in His plan for eternity when His true community will be 'a kingdom of priests' to God to reign forever in creation. All in original sin work against God in fulfilling this plan, so that sins they commit are in some way against that plan. Man, aided by Satan, seeks to fulfil his own plan.

### **The Matter of Sin and God's Wrath on Sin**

Discovering the *nature* of sin is no easy task. Its origin is hidden. All we know is that by Adam sin entered the world, and death entered by sin. That does not explain sin. We have statements regarding sin in the Bible and endless philosophical and religious reasonings about it in many philosophies and religions. Generally the ideas are abstract and not of much use. What we do know is that sin is personal, that is, it is a matter of the wrong action of will. Satan is said to have sinned from the beginning, though when that beginning was is difficult to ascertain. We know that Man sinned from his beginning. All his sins issue from his will. His will accepted the lie of the serpent in Eden and the action of his will was against God (1 Tim. 2:13, 14). Transgressing the law is sin and it is a deliberate willing not to obey the law but to disobey it. To be in God is not to sin (1 John 3:4–7) for to transgress the law is to be of the Devil (1 John 3:8). Sin is known by various words such as, 'missing the mark', 'failure', 'rebellion', 'error', 'fault', and so on, and so often what we call the guilt of sin is included in the word 'sin' (cf. Ps. 32:5; Jer. 33:8; cf. 30:12–15), that is, there is always guilt where there is sin. Mainly it is to exist apart from God, maintaining one's so-called freedom. John says plainly 'He who commits sin is of the devil' (1 John 3:8) and, in this context, to sin comes from belonging to the system of the devil.

There are many kinds of sin but they all stem from not believing God for who He is and what He does. Jesus said the Holy Spirit would convict or

convince the world of sin 'because they do not believe in me'. Primarily he set out to bring his listeners to believe on the One who had sent him, that is, his Father (John 5:24; cf. 14:7). Man has—so to speak—the power to sin and go his own way, but not the power to cease from sinning and come to the Father.

There are many descriptions of sin, and one is that it is a disease. In Isaiah chapter 1 the prophet speaks of the nature of sin. It is, here, mostly rebellion against the covenant God. Verses 2 and 3 show that rebellion. Verse 4 is graphic in its description of that sin:

Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.

Verses 5–6 then show the outcome of their sin of rebellion:

Why will you still be smitten, that you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds; they are not pressed out, or bound up, or softened with oil.

What we need to notice is that sin, itself, is *not* a disease but is rebellion against God and is working deeds that offend Him. The *result* of these deeds is sickness. I once read that sinful Man is like an orange which is over-ripe and has begun to rot inwardly. This may well be the case when his sin

brings the retribution of corruption, but the illustration virtually describes Man as the victim of sin, and suggests he needs to be healed from a disease. A disease is not the person, nor is the person accountable for it, but it is something which infects and affects the person. There is no disgrace, being human, if we catch a disease. No one 'catches' sin and thus its consequences which may often be sicknesses or woundings. God has always placed the onus of choice on the sinner. Sin is all from the will of the sinner. The law of oranges differs from the law of humans. Jesus also placed the onus of choice on the person and on one occasion said, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin' (John 8:34). He added, 'So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed'. One is freed from the bondage of sin, but not from a disease. If Isaiah 53:4a—generally translated as 'Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows'—can also be translated, 'Surely he has borne our sicknesses and carried our pains', then let us look at that whole chapter of Isaiah 53 and see the emphasis made on vicarious suffering for sin and the outcome of sin. If Christ can be said to bear our sicknesses and carry our pains it is only because they are the *result* of our sins, and in the chapter sin is a most serious matter. To free us from the consequences of our sins there must be a vicarious suffering *for* our sins.

Again if we look at a passage such as Jeremiah chapter 30 we see that Israel is wounded and its hurt is incurable, but it is because Israel has sinned that God had dealt the blow which brought that incurable wound: 'Because your guilt is great,

because your sins are flagrant'. The wound is not the sin, but the consequence of sin. God, however, in His covenantal love and mercy will restore Israel and her fortunes. Elsewhere God shows the same relationship of His wrath and His love:

For the LORD has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God. For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you. *In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your Redeemer* (Isa. 54:6–8, emphasis mine).

Likewise in the prophecy of Hosea, Ephraim sins grievously as it casts off the knowledge of God and indulges in harlotry. God prophesies judgment for it, and on one occasion says, 'Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone' (Hosea 4:17), much as to say, 'You will get no sense from him', but as the narrative continues, and God has brought judgment upon them, He suddenly declares in His love:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! How can I make you like Admah! How can I treat you like Zeboiim! My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy (Hosea 11:8–9).

Let us be sure that we do not see Man—the first couple—merely as the victim of his own sin, catching a disease in his helplessness, but let us see him as sin's slave because of the deliberate action of his own will as a sinner. Romans 5:12–21 shows how serious was that sin as it entered the world through

the first man and brought death with it. When Man in Eden stepped out of God, that is, out of His will by the device of the serpent, then he emerged into a changed creation, a very frightening one. This was because of his sin. Devoid of pure communion with God as the first couple had known it in innocence in all its wonder and beauty, fear already charged them in their consciousness of their nakedness. Everything outside Eden presented another face, a face which came from their guilt of sin. The punishment of their sin was there to remind them of its dreadful nature—the cursed land, the pain in childbirth. The first son born to them was a murderer and the second a prophet, so complex were the matters of good and evil as they confronted that primal couple, and so complex they have ever been to the body of living humanity. In all this Genesis account there is nothing said of God's wrath but sin was no mere disease they caught off the guileful serpent. The loss of innocence brought the burden of human guilt which lies heavy on the spirits of wilful humanity. 'Wilful humanity' means Man wills to do the sin he will. James Denney once commented: 'There is nothing good in the world but a good will, and nothing bad but a bad will; there is nothing moral at all except by the exercise of will'.<sup>18</sup> To portray Man as overtaken by sin, and in any sense to show him as the victim of sin, is to pity him for what was the outrageous outcome of his own act of will. The universal command of God for Man to repent (Acts 17:31, *passim*) would have no

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<sup>18</sup> James Denney, *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, James Clarke & Co., London, 1959, p. 145.

meaning if Man were not totally responsible for his own sin.

Of course we must not forget the beautiful promise of grace, that a Bruiser of the serpent would appear to crush the serpent, even though his own heel would be wounded in that action. We must not forget that the Creator clothed them in their nakedness, an act and symbol of the garments of righteousness with which repentant Man was to be clothed.

### **Paul's View of the Wrath of God and the Gospel of God's Righteousness**

Paul, in writing his Letter to the Roman church, is desiring to come to them and says he is anxious to preach the gospel to them as indeed he has taught it in many places. In 1:16–17 he claims the gospel is 'the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith' in God, and speaks briefly of God's righteousness which saves those who have faith in Him. The thought that God saves sinners would not be a new concept to those who lived in Israel and were members of God's covenant people, but at the same time it would be startling if it included Gentiles, and certainly Paul's implications that those who were under covenant law needed salvation would be a bugbear for many Jews of Paul's day. So his claim—in essence that this salvation was to be received by faith, that God's righteousness as expressed in the gospel was His means and His power of salvation through the death of Christ—was radical. Paul would have to set out this salvation in credible terms.

As we know, from 1:18 to 3:26 he set forth the gospel in powerful terms. Verse 18 tells us, 'For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth'. We should note that the word 'For', connecting verses 16 and 17 with the 'For' which sequentially links those two verses with verse 18 and onwards, shows us that Paul was describing the condition of Man from which the gospel saves him. He continues the argument with further connectives such as 'for' and 'because'. He was not speaking about wrath for the sake of describing what wrath is: verses 1:18 to 3:26 are not a disquisition on wrath although it certainly teaches us a lot about wrath. Paul was saying, virtually, 'I am setting forth the gospel to you, and the first thing you should see is that Man is under wrath, and as I proceed you will realise what it is from which Man has to be saved. The gospel deals fully with the matter of God's wrath upon Man, and God's way of saving him from it, so attend to what I say about wrath.' His argument was carefully developed as he showed that both Gentiles and Jews were under the same wrath, and needed the same justifying righteousness of God to save them.

In verse 18 we read the reason or cause of God's wrath. It is that two operative elements in Man are 'ungodliness' (*asebeia*) and 'unrighteousness' (*adikia*) and are really the one in action. Ungodliness is really 'anti-godness' to the degree of impiety and attack on all God is and stands for, which is virtually unrighteousness since ungodliness is refusal to be righteous by the principles and law

that God sets forth. Another form of it, if possible, is to insist and maintain that one is righteous when one is not. The deep evil of *asebeia* and *adikia* is that men and women in this state suppress or hold down or enchain the truth of God. It is direct opposition to God, Himself. That truth has to do with all God's being and all His action in creation and human redemption. What evil can Man do more than this? No wonder God's wrath is upon these persons. Man's ungodliness and unrighteousness is not just regrettable error—as in Greek thinking—or weakness of effort to defeat his sin, but it is highly reprehensible action directed deliberately against God. This, then, explains the outpouring of God's wrath in the present age, the time before the climatic judgments and wrath which are to be expressed at the close of the age in the great and notable 'day of the Lord'. In the Old Testament we have references to the kindling of the Lord's wrath. *Asebeia* and *adikia* constantly kindle His wrath in that age and no less, then, in this age.

When we read verses 19–23 we see the serious nature of these two elements. Rebellious Man refuses to read what the creation declares—the fact and truth of God's being. Paul says that the nature of creation is self-evident, and although God is invisible, there is a sense in which creation in its being and operations visibilises God to the extent that we can know Him, and know—incredibly enough!—His invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity. That knowledge should bring the fear of God which would be the beginning of wisdom. Instead, Man refused to honour God and to be thankful to Him for all His Being and His goodness

in creation, choosing to regard himself as wise and going on to make his own gods out of the lower creatures of creation, giving to them dignity and honour which alone belong to God. What crass evil it was that Man acted out in his rebellion. These things which he still does describe *asebeia* and *adikia* as they really are. They are monstrosities committed against the holy and righteous God. Who, then, could argue against God venting His wrath upon such sinners?

When we return to verse 18, we see that Paul says God's wrath is being revealed from heaven, that is, His wrath is something which could be perceived if one wills to perceive it, for it is not hidden. All humanity ought look to this 'revealing' or revelation. In verse 17 Paul has said that God's righteousness has been revealed in the gospel. Here, then, are two revelations, one of God's righteousness and the other of His wrath. We need to see both at the one time. How then is God's wrath revealed? It is pertinent to say here that sinful Man will not see God's wrath revealed, even when he feels it strongly but does not know it is wrath. The implication that he—Man—is wrath-worthy is wholly unacceptable, especially if sin is a disease he has unconsciously caught! Likewise he will not see the righteousness of God which is the gospel whilst he pursues his life of ungodliness and unrighteousness which led him to idolatry. Sin has the power to deceive the heart and then to harden it (Heb. 3:12–13).

We do not have to look far to see the act of God's judgment. The very rejection of God brings into Man a terrible futility and hopelessness of ever

being free. Whilst he does not recognise the fact it is nevertheless so—that his mind became darkness and truth has disappeared. Verses 21 to 23 do not explicitly call this God’s wrath, yet Man’s action builds him up to receive the wrath. Indeed the very state Man is in is the wrath of God, but it awaits the final act of God in giving Man up to his dreadful state. Verse 24 says, ‘Therefore God gave them up [*paredoken autous ho theos*] in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves’. The point I believe we have to establish is that God’s giving them up as He does successively three times in this one chapter (vv. 24, 26, 28), is His wrath. Seeing this action and understanding it is seeing the revelation of His wrath. There are two actions of God: (i) His giving them up to sin; and (ii) their becoming such creatures of their own guilt that they deteriorate to the point of being made reprobate by God and so lose moral sense and action as they live in *asebeia* and *adikia* under the compounding wrath of God.

### **God Giving Man up to His Sin Is His Wrath**

We will examine the first point—God giving ‘them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves’. James Denney says:

With ver. 24 the Apostle turns from this sin [idolatry] to its punishment. Because of it . . . God gave them up. To lose God is to lose everything: to lose the connection with Him in constantly glorifying and giving Him thanks, is to sink into an abyss of darkness, intellectual and moral. It is to become fitted for wrath at last, under the pressure

of wrath all the time. Such, in idea, is the history of humanity to Paul, as interpreted by its issue in the moral condition of the pagan world when he wrote. [*paredoken*] all three places (vss. 24, 26, 28) expresses the judicial action of God.<sup>19</sup>

Ernst Käsemann comments:

The threefold [*paredoken autos ho theos*] . . . marks the changing from guilt to fate . . . Guilt and punishment remain materially the same . . . Portrayal of guilt is increasingly shorter and that of corruption increasingly extensive, culminating in the list of vices in vv. 29–31 . . . The cosmos which will not recognise God’s deity in service becomes a chaos of unfettered perversion . . . The manifestation of God’s wrath . . . does not remain in the purely private or . . . moral sphere. It leads from the inner darkening of existence to the objectifying of folly in idolatry. In its cosmic scope it anticipates the eschatologically public character of the last judgment.<sup>20</sup>

In seeking to see the outpouring of God’s wrath we must keep in mind that Paul is not stating this is for ever. We have already suggested that the inclusion in wrath of those ‘who have exchanged the truth about God for a lie’ is with a view to the righteousness which will ultimately justify them, but we must keep in mind that wrath is not just an action to draw human beings on to salvation, but is a continuing state until the last judgment where

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<sup>19</sup> James Denney, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, vol. 2, pt 2, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1951, p. 593.

<sup>20</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1980, p. 44.

human beings do not repent and believe God. The text does not tell us wrath will cease, nor that it is only a device of God to get us to make repentance. Paul would have us see the total, desperate state of Man requiring the hostility of God to sin and His wrath poured out upon those who seek to suppress the truth in acts of wickedness. Leon Morris, speaking on verse 24 and following, has this to say:

The verb *gave them over* shows that God is active and not passive in the process (cf. Ps. 81:12; Acts 7:42). This does not mean is vindictive. That would be untrue both to the facts of the case and to the apostle's thought. Throughout this epistle Paul insists that God's purpose is one of mercy (cf. 11:32). Elsewhere the situation is viewed from another angle: people gave themselves up to licentious behaviour (Eph. 4:19); they are responsible human beings. But here the thought is that God is active in the process. He shuts people up to the consequences of their sin so that they will see their error and look to him for mercy and for a better way. Notice that Paul does not call on God to punish sinners. *Rather, he has the profound thought that their immersion in their sins is itself their punishment* (cf. 'one is punished by the very things by which he sins', Wis. 11:16).<sup>21</sup>

Douglas J. Moo similarly speaks of the present wrath of God on sinners and their sin. He says:

If, then, 'reveal' indicates the actual inflicting of God's wrath, when, and how, does it take place? Although God will inflict his wrath on sin finally and irrevocably at the end of time (2:5), there is an anticipatory working of God's wrath in the events of history. Particularly, as

vv. 24–28 suggest, the wrath of God is now visible in his 'handing over' of human beings to their chosen way of sin and all its consequences. As Schiller's famous aphorism puts it, 'The history of the world is the judgment of the world.' It is this judgment of the world that the present infliction of God's wrath is intended to reveal. For the present experience of God's wrath is merely a foretaste of what will come on the day of judgment. Furthermore, what both the warning of 'wrath to come' and the present experience of wrath demonstrate is the sentence of condemnation under which all people outside Christ stand. It is this reality that Paul wants to get across to [his] readers here.<sup>22</sup>

Let us examine a point made by Käsemann, Morris and Moo, namely that being given over to sin is being given over to the wrath of God. Käsemann says, 'Guilt and punishment remain materially the same . . . Portrayal of guilt is increasingly shorter and that of corruption increasingly extensive, culminating in the list of vices in vv. 20–31.' Punishment we know as the appropriate administration of wrath. Käsemann points out that the guilt increases the corruption and, we may conclude, the corruption increases the guilt. Morris says that Paul 'has the profound thought that their immersion in their sins is itself their punishment'. Legally, guilt is punishment. Hence Morris's Wisdom quote, 'One is punished by the very things by which he sins'. Moo agrees, at least in part, 'the wrath of God is now visible in his "handing over" of human beings to their chosen way of sin and all its

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<sup>21</sup> Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1992, p. 101.

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<sup>22</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996, p. 124.

consequences. As Schiller's famous aphorism puts it, "The history of the world is the judgment of the world."<sup>23</sup>

Another way of saying what we have just voiced is to say that God's wrath is not sin but sin is God's wrath. Of course we need to qualify this. What we mean is that guilt is the wrath of God in the sense that objectively guilt is punishment, and that subjectively the sense of guilt is disturbing and brings confusion and anguish to the person<sup>23</sup> such as we see in Isaiah 57:20–21, 'But the wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot rest, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked.' It is possible to translate 'wicked' also as 'guilty'. We will be pursuing this line of thinking as we talk about guilt.

### Given up to Sin's Guilt—Man's Experience of God's Wrath

*The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* in describing guilt says, amongst other descriptions:

3. Desert (*of a penalty*) . . . 5. The state of having wilfully committed crime or heinous moral offence;

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<sup>23</sup> The term 'sense of guilt' is a difficult one. Some people with morbid consciences do not have a proper sense of guilt. Others with hardened consciences do not *feel* guilt. Even so, human beings know what it is to feel guilt, that is, know they have sinned or committed a crime, whether they have remorse or repentance in the situation. For thoughtful studies in 'Guilt' see *Guilt: Its Meaning and Significance* by John G. McKenzie (Allen & Unwin, London, 1962), and *Guilt: The Grey Eminence behind Character History and Culture*, by John Carroll (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1985).

criminality, great culpability . . . 6. In legal use: The state of being justly liable to penalty.<sup>24</sup>

A barrister once told me, 'Guilt is punishment', but he did not open the subject further. A person is guilty of a wrong act and may or may not be convicted of the act, that is, be found guilty, and if guilty then punished as appropriately as possible.

When we turn to the Bible it can be shown that there is 'sin' and there is also 'the guilt of sin'. It requires a protracted and sensitive research to be able to assert this conclusion. This is because many of the Hebrew words for sin also have, in certain contexts, the idea of guilt. One of the primary words for sin in Hebrew is *awon* and it can also be used for iniquity and guilt, as also for actions which are perverse. Cain used this word when he complained to God that 'My *punishment* [*awon*] is greater than I can bear' (Gen. 4:13). The word God used for Cain's sin in Genesis 4:7—'sin is couching at the door'—was *chatta'th*, the primary word for sin but the two are virtually synonymous. Another greatly used word is *rasha*, which can mean 'wicked', 'criminal' or 'guilty'. In Isaiah 6:7, 'And he touched my mouth, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt [*awon*] is taken away, and your sin [*chatta'th*] is forgiven"'. There are also other words such as *asham* (error, negligent, guilt), and *ra* (evil). In a passage such as Psalm 106:6 we have, 'Both we and our fathers have sinned [*chata*]; we have committed iniquity [*awah*], we have done wickedly [*rasha*]'.

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<sup>24</sup> *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 1, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986, p. 902.

In Psalm 32:5 it is interesting to compare the *AV* and *RSV*. The *AV* has, 'I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.' The *RSV* has, 'I acknowledged my sin to thee, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"; then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin'. The term 'iniquity of my sin' can be rightly translated 'the guilt of my sin'. The latter appears again in Jeremiah 33:8, 'I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me'. In Exodus 34:7 and Nahum 1:3, God says he will not forgive the guilty. Jeremiah 30 is a chapter which helps us to understand God's wrath and human guilt. If there is lack of health and deep wounds then it is because God has smitten them for their sin. There is a refrain here, 'because your guilt its great, because your sins are flagrant', followed by another, 'Because your guilt is great, because your sins are flagrant, I have done these things to you'.

This brings us to the point of seeing that in Israel there was a very dynamic view of sin, no matter which words were used. 'Guilt of sin' describes the form of punishment sin has in itself. This is seen in Psalm 32. David commences with praise for what we will call 'the non-guilty, justified person' in verses 1–2: 'Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.' We have evidence that David was in such a state before his sin

with Bathsheba and Uriah her husband. Psalm 51 tells us his immediate reaction when Nathan the prophet faced him with his sin (2 Sam. 12:1ff.). David had sinned and had not confessed his sin. We will look, then, in Psalm 32:3–4 at his state of being when he refused to confess that sin:

When I declared not my sin,  
my body wasted away through my groaning  
all day long.  
For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Paul Tournier in his book *Guilt and Grace* tells the story of a man who came to consult with him:

The Psalter gives us, in trembling accents, the experiences of King David and of many believers. As he comes into my consulting room a man tells me that it was reading Psalm xxxii which made him decide to come and confess (Ps. xxxii. 1, 3, 5):

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered . . .  
When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away  
through my groaning all day long . . .  
I acknowledge my sin to thee,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;  
I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord';  
then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin.<sup>25</sup>

Somewhere else Tournier says that the verses he quotes describe any person in his clinic who is neurotic. From our point of view we are seeing what it means for a human being to live in guilt. The Israelite who acknowledged his sin was forgiven.

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Tournier, *Guilt and Grace: A Psychological Study*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1962, p. 201.

Even then provision was made in Leviticus for each kind of sin he had committed. Blood had to be shed to seal that forgiveness. Sin is of such deep nature that there has to be a basis for pardon. Mercy and justice have to meet together. If a person sins then the guilt is a most dynamic factor in the life of that one. It is with him night and day. Count it as punishment built into sin or not, he feels his sin or crime deeply. I am saying that this is the wrath of God. No one sins whose sin is not seen by God. All of us have known something of the experience of withholding confession. If somehow pardon could be established then the fact of the sin would remain. Something more has to happen to the inner turmoil, the restlessness and the burden of shame.

Take another psalm, Psalm 38. It is one which should be read by all. I include the whole text for consideration:

O LORD, rebuke me not in thy anger,  
nor chasten me in thy wrath!  
For thy arrows have sunk into me,  
and thy hand has come down on me.  
There is no soundness in my flesh  
because of thy indignation;  
there is no health in my bones  
because of my sin.  
For my iniquities have gone over my head;  
they weigh like a burden too heavy for me.  
My wounds grow foul and fester  
because of my foolishness,  
I am utterly bowed down and prostrate;  
all the day I go about mourning.  
For my loins are filled with burning,  
and there is no soundness in my flesh.

I am utterly spent and crushed;  
I groan because of the tumult of my heart.  
Lord, all my longing is known to thee,  
my sighing is not hidden from thee.  
My heart throbs, my strength fails me;  
and the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me.  
My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague,  
and my kinsmen stand afar off.  
Those who seek my life lay their snares,  
those who seek my hurt speak of ruin,  
and meditate treachery all the day long.  
But I am like a deaf man, I do not hear,  
like a dumb man who does not open his mouth.  
Yea, I am like a man who does not hear,  
and in whose mouth are no rebukes.  
But for thee, O LORD, do I wait;  
it is thou, O LORD my God, who wilt answer.  
For I pray, 'Only let them not rejoice over me,  
who boast against me when my foot slips!'  
For I am ready to fall,  
and my pain is ever with me.  
I confess my iniquity,  
I am sorry for my sin.  
Those who are my foes without cause are mighty,  
and many are those who hate me wrongfully.  
Those who render me evil for good  
are my adversaries because I follow after good.  
Do not forsake me, O LORD!  
O my God, be not far from me!  
Make haste to help me,  
O Lord, my salvation!

Here is a man who knows God, and he is unerring in his discernment that he is under God's wrath. We need to read and re-read at least the first ten verses. It is Psalm 32:3–4 being greatly expanded. Statements such as are made in those first ten verses are a classic depiction of a person under the

active wrath of the God whom he knows so intimately. It should be seen that here the wrath is felt as guilt in the mind and body of David who had known God intimately. The closer the relationship the more painful the wrath. The attack also comes upon him from outside, for his enemies know that he is in a vulnerable state. Before, in innocence he was inviolable: now he is in danger.

On verses 3 and 4, Sir Richard Baker has a live comment:

*'Thine anger. . . my sin.'* I, alas! am as an anvil under two hammers; one of thine anger, another of my sin; both of them beating incessantly upon me; the hammer of thine anger beating upon my flesh and making that unsound; the hammer of my sin beating upon my bones and making them unquiet; although indeed both beat upon both; but thine anger more upon my flesh, as being more sensible; my sin more upon my bones, as being more obdurate. God's anger and sin are the two efficient causes of all misery; but the procatarctic [primary?] cause indeed is sin: God's anger, like the house that Samson pulled upon his own head, falls not upon us but *when we pull it upon ourselves by sin.*<sup>26</sup>

Of verses 13 to 20 Artur Weiser says in his book *The Psalms: A Commentary*:

He quite candidly confesses before God in vv. 11–18 that he has patiently and without any opposition submitted to these afflictions, too, willing to endure his suffering submissively, because he is conscious of having sinned against God and of being powerless. For he entrusts his cause entirely to God, who is the only stay

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted by Charles H. Spurgeon, in his *The Treasury of David: An Expository and Devotional Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 2 (Guardian Press, Grand Rapids, 1976), p. 229.

and hope left to him. He trusts that God, who knows that he was striving after that which is good, will triumph and not the boastful enemies who rendered him evil for good (vv. 16, 20). Thus the worshipper stands before his heavenly Lord in genuine contrition and without any complacency or vindictiveness, confessing his guilt, sincerely repenting of his sins (v. 18), earnestly resolved to do what is good (v. 20) and 'despairing of himself but not to God'. Having relieved his heart of its burden through prayer and having entrusted his affliction to the grace of God, he can now dare to ask God for his help and can hope to find his salvation wholly in his communion with him.<sup>27</sup>

We now return to Psalm 32:5–7. David describes what happened to him in confession of his sins, and in his penitential Psalm of 51 we see the depth and sincerity of his confession. In Psalm 32 we read:

I acknowledged my sin to thee,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;  
I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD';  
then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin.  
Therefore let every one who is godly  
offer prayer to thee;  
at a time of distress, in the rush of great waters,  
they shall not reach him.  
Thou art a hiding place for me,  
thou preservest me from trouble;  
thou dost encompass me with deliverance (vv. 5–7).

Here is a great flood of relief, and so verses 1 and 2 now refer to David, that is, 'Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD imputes no

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<sup>27</sup> Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, SCM Press, London, 1962, p. 326.

iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.' He is in a state of rich blessing. This is because not only the sin is forgiven, but also the guilt of it has gone in the same manner that Isaiah's sin was forgiven and his guilt taken away.

One more glance at the terrible state of an unshriven sinner is found in Isaiah 57:20–21: 'But the wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot rest, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked.' These wicked ones know the pollution of sin and its deadly confrontation, reminding us of the sad picture of Proverbs 5:22–23: 'The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is caught in the toils of his sin. He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is lost.' No less sad is the picture of a man whose heart once flowed forth the great issues of life (Prov. 4:23) but has come to be described as, 'Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked' (Prov. 25:26).

We know that the reality of sin and the wrath of God upon it is as much a revelation to Man as is the righteousness of God in saving the sinner. If we look again at the terms used in the Old Testament for sin we see that they cover the following: wickedness, confusion, iniquity, perversion, guilt, transgression, rebellion, wrongness, trouble, vanity, evil, lying, deceit, trespass, breach of trust, error, negligence, injustice, disobedience, and when we add to these the states of guilt which attend all sins, such as fear, confusion, anger, heaviness, dread, the sense of failure, pollution and coming judgment, we are very near to seeing what is the nature of sin

and guilt, being as they are of the one piece. We rightly ask, 'Is not God justified in His wrath when He sees His creature, once created in His image and full of glory, now a pitiable and evil thing but still holding out against his Creator?' Lest we should think that God ought to be bound to mercy, let us remember that the heart of this creature is 'deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt', and that 'every imagination of the thoughts of his heart [is] only evil continually' (cf. Jer 17:9; Gen. 6:5; 8:21). If we protest against this biblical description of humanity then let us remember that Christ alone knew what was—and is—in Man (John 2:23–24; Mark 7:20–23).

The conclusion I wish to draw for this section is that God's wrath is felt in the conscience as sin is committed and as God brings His righteous anger against the sinner in terms of the turmoil of guilt as humans know it, and as we saw it in the Old Testament. Of course we looked at it only in the terms of personal guilt, but it is described in various places as the guilt of nations before God, firstly Israel the named covenant people, and then all the nations as they rebelled against God. Psalm 2:1–3 places them clearly in the question, 'Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?' The fact is that:

*The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the LORD and his anointed, saying,  
'Let us burst their bonds asunder,  
and cast their cords from us'.*

God's wrathful response is:

He who sits in the heavens laughs;  
the LORD has them in derision.  
Then he will speak to them in his wrath, `and terrify them in his fury, saying, 'I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.'  
I will tell of the decree of the LORD:  
He said to me, 'You are my son, today I have begotten you.  
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.  
You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.'  
Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth.  
Serve the LORD with fear, with trembling kiss his feet, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way; for his wrath is quickly kindled.  
Blessed are all who take refuge in him (Ps. 2:4–11).

God's wrath, then, is felt universally in persons and nations. Let us, then, return to our Study in Romans concerning Him giving up sinners to their sinning, their most guilty sinning.

### **THE SOLUTION TO GOD'S WRATH IN THE TRUTH THAT 'GOD IS LOVE'**

At the commencement of our book we said that when Paul began to expound the righteousness of God as that which justified Man, then we saw that Paul's first action in proclaiming the gospel was to tackle the matter of God's wrath. If that could be linked with Man's sin, and if it could be shown that

all human beings have sinned, whether Jews or Gentiles, then all would need God's redemption as He had planned it. Elsewhere Paul certainly speaks of God's wrath to come (e.g. Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10). At the same time Paul speaks of God's love in the context of God's wrath, that is, His love saves us from His wrath. We need to look at Romans 5:5–11:

... and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man—though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. Not only so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation.

The essence is that God's love is poured into us via the work of the gospel. God shows His love to us in that whilst we were sinners Christ died for us, and through Christ's blood God has saved us from wrath. Imagine His legitimately lifting the burden of sin and guilt and setting us wholly free! Again, in 1 John 4:9–10 John tells us:

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation [propitiation] for our sins.

Propitiation is that act by which God's wrath is diverted from the sinner to his crucified Saviour. Some would strongly oppose this idea, seeing it as an impossible and a bare substitution, but such a case of vicarious suffering is seen powerfully in Isaiah 52:14 – 53:12. Certainly God's love is in sending His Son into the world to give us life, and certainly the obtaining of that life requires the work of propitiation. The action of the sacrificial victim bearing the sins of the sinner is often found in the Old Testament, especially in the Book of Leviticus.

We come then to our statement, 'God's wrath is not sin, but sin is God's wrath'. We mean this in the sense that Käsemann says, 'Guilt and punishment remain materially the same'; that James Denney said, 'With verse 24 the Apostle turns from this sin [idolatry] to its punishment. Because of it . . . God gave them up. To lose God is to lose everything: to lose the connection with Him in constantly glorifying and giving Him thanks, is to sink into an abyss of darkness, intellectual and moral. It is to become fitted for wrath at last, under the pressure of wrath all the time'; that Leon Morris said, 'Notice that Paul does not call on God to punish sinners. *Rather, he has the profound thought that their immersion in their sins is itself their punishment* (cf. "one is punished by the very things by which he sins", Wis. 11:16),' that Douglas Moo has said, 'the wrath of God is now visible in his "handing over" of human beings to their chosen way of sin and all its consequences. As Schiller's famous aphorism puts it, "The history of the world is the judgment of the world."'

Our view of the wrath of God then is that God comes to the sinner in personal confrontation of that one's sin, so that His very Presence heightens the pain and spasms of guilt to the degree that they are intolerable. In Psalms 32 and 38 we saw that the sinner there was a covenant member and knew something of the workings of God's wrath, and in the face of that wrath pleaded grace and mercy from God. We have already touched upon the fact that in Israel the forgiveness of sins could only come through the shedding of blood, and this moved the writer of Hebrews to say as much in 9:22 of his Letter: 'Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins'. To modern ears the whole matter of sacrifices and blood-shedding sounds strange and even offensive, but it was well understood by Israelites as God's way of averting His wrath upon sin. Shortly we will see how this was the case.

John links the matter of propitiation with the love of God. In 1 John 4:9–10 he writes:

*In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins.*

Most translations use the word 'expiation' whereas it ought to be 'propitiation'. The *NIV* and *NRSV* have 'an atoning sacrifice for our sins'. Shortly we will have cause to compare these two words. Our present conclusion from John's statement is that God sent His Son into the world to give life and that

the giving of life was to be through Christ's atoning sacrifice for sins.

## THE NATURE OF PROPITIATION

Dr Leon Morris more than any other theologian has given great emphasis to the nature and necessity of understanding the principle of propitiation. His many articles in Bible and Theological Dictionaries are simple to follow. More detailed are his two chapters (5 and 6) on propitiation in his book *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*. These cover the subject thoroughly and are met with respect by many theologians. To begin with I quote from his article on 'propitiation':

**Propitiation.** The turning away of wrath by an offering. In the NT this idea is conveyed by the use of *hilaskomai* (Heb. 2:17), *hilasterion* (Rom. 3:25), and *hilasmos* (I John 2:2; 4:10). In the OT the principal verb is *kipper*, usually rendered in the LXX by *exilaskomai*. Outside the Bible the word group to which the Greek words belong unquestionably has the significance of averting wrath. But in recent times it has been suggested that the Bible usage is different. C. H. Dodd argues strongly that, when the word group occurs in the LXX and the NT, it denotes expiation (the cancellation of sin), not propitiation (the turning away of the wrath of God). He denies that 'the wrath of God' denotes anything more than a process of cause and effect whereby disaster inevitably follows sin.

For a criticism of his arguments see the works by Nicole and Morris in the bibliography. Here it is sufficient to notice that neither Dodd nor others who argue for 'expiation' seem to give sufficient attention to the biblical teaching. The idea of the wrath of God is

stubbornly rooted in the OT, where it is referred to 585 times. The words of the *hilaskomai* group do not denote simple forgiveness or cancellation of sin, but that forgiveness or cancellation of sin which includes the turning away of God's wrath (e.g., Lam. 3:42–43). This is not a process of celestial bribery, for the removal of the wrath is in the last resort due to God himself. Of the process of atonement by sacrifice, he says: 'I have given it to you' (Lev. 17:11). Note also Ps. 78:38: 'Many a time turned he his anger away.'

While God's wrath is not mentioned as frequently in the NT as the OT, it is there. Man's sin receives its due reward, not because of some impersonal retribution, but because God's wrath is directed against it (Rom. 1:18, 24, 26, 28). The whole of the argument of the opening part of Romans is that all men, Gentiles and Jews alike, are sinners, and that they come under the wrath and condemnation of God. When Paul turns to salvation, he thinks of Christ's death as *hilasterion* (Rom. 3:25), a means of removing the divine wrath. The paradox of the OT is repeated in NT that God himself provides the means of removing his own wrath. The love of the Father is shown in that he 'sent his own Son to be the propitiation for our sins' (I John 4:10). The purpose of Christ's becoming 'a merciful and faithful high priest' was 'to make propitiation for the sins of the people' (Heb. 2:17). His propitiation is adequate for all (I John 2:2).

The consistent Bible view is that the sin of man has incurred the wrath of God. That wrath is averted only by Christ's atoning offering. From this standpoint his saving work is properly called propitiation.<sup>28</sup>

The idea of propitiation such as Morris describes is anathema to some theologians and readers of

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<sup>28</sup> Leon Morris, 'Propitiation' in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1984, p. 888.

the Bible. It appears to them that the version of God's propitiation in relation to His wrath is a frightening one. It has to do with a god who can scarcely keep his temper, whose relationship with humanity is a contractual one and who virtually lambasts his son on a cross to take the punishment he metes out to this son, so that the punishment being borne by that one as a substitute for all mankind satisfies his—the god's—legal demands and lets sinners off their deserved punishment. Critics of this view say that such a god is a monster, and in the modern idiom have been heard to say he is a child abuser. One wonders whether this view has actually ever been forwarded after this manner or whether it is the way some people think they have heard it propounded. I think some theologians have a problem innate to the use of analogy. The Scripture says quite plainly that there is nothing created to which we can liken God, so that when we use human wrath as an analogy for Divine wrath then we have created a hopeless situation. To say—wrongly—that God is *like* a father is another analogy which brings false understanding of God. The very best of all things created, for example, a good father, is a most inadequate analogy and the theology based on it will be *wholly* misleading.

The arguments put forward against the 'bare' substitutionary theory of the Atonement arise from certain concepts the objectors hold.<sup>29</sup> They

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<sup>29</sup> The critical statement, 'the bare substitutionary theory of the Atonement' is intended to point to a stark and loveless theory. However, rightly understood, the substitutionary principle is anything but bare. Substitution is of the essence of love—one giving oneself for another—such as is portrayed graphically in the 53rd chapter of Isaiah. We need to pause and consider whether, in rejecting this principle, we are not left without hope. Objections to substitution may arise from human pride.

say that the God they know is love, and that He is anxious to transform sinners by that love and not to punish them. As being Love He could never be wrathful with humanity, and certainly not with His Son. They say that the ideas of God as Judge and Executor of punishment have arisen from wrong views of Him, for example, that in the beginning God contracted with Man to be good and obedient to His law, and that Man has come to understand law as legislation more after the idea of Roman jurisprudence. These criticisms are a caricature of the biblical doctrine of law. What is often the case is that human beings have had 'bad experiences' of God in church life and they rationalise Him in terms of their experiences.

It has to be fairly admitted that a doctrine of law has played a large part in seeing God through a legal lens, or should I say, a legalistic view-finder. A statement such as, 'Before there was ever any law, there was the Trinity', cannot be substantiated. The law is the law *of* God, that is, it is the law of His Being, of the being of the Three Persons of the Triune Godhead, and cannot be said to come into being only with the creation of the world and of Man in particular. It ever was because it was the law of relationships of the Three Persons. The law of God is the law of love and it is in that law that the Persons subsist. It is *of* the Persons and not *for* them.

It is not a law to which they are subject, in which case we would have a quaternity, a fourth hypostasis, so to speak. That God implanted this law in Man at creation is a self-evident fact, for Man was created as a creature of law, that is, of the law of love, the law of true relationships.<sup>30</sup>

The law has been called the transcript of God. J. A. Motyer whom we have already partly quoted on law has written his article on the Biblical concept of law of which we now fully quote the sections, 'Law in the Image of God' and 'A Truly Human Life':

*Law in the Image of God.* Turning now to a very different genre of Scripture, we find in Lev. 19 that God has provided another image of himself on earth. Every aspect of human experience is gathered into this rich review of man's life under God's law: filial duty (vs. 3), religious commitment (vs. 4), ritual exactness (vs. 5), care of the needy (vs. 9), honesty in deed and word (vss. 11–12), and many more, touching on relationships and even on dress, hygiene, and horticulture. Yet all this variety suspends from one central truth: 'I am the Lord.' Lord is the divine name, the 'I am what I am' (Exod. 3:14), so that the significance of the recurring claim is not 'You must do what I tell you' (i.e., 'lord' as an authority word) but 'You must do this or that because I am what I am'; every precept of the law is a reflection of 'what I am.' Man is the living, personal image of God; the law is the written, preceptual image of God. The intention of Lev. 19 is declared at the outset: 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy' (vs. 2).

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<sup>30</sup> My understanding of law is set out in two books, *Sweeter than Honey, More Precious than Gold* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1995) and *The Law of Eternal Delight* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2001). See also *Calvin's Concept of the Law* by I. John Hesselink (Pickwick Publications, Alison Park, 1992).

The Lord longs for his people to live in his image, and to that end he has given them his law.

*A Truly Human Life.* When man in the image of God and law in the image of God come together in the fully obedient life, then man is indeed 'being himself.' His nature is the image of God, and the law is given both to activate and to direct that nature into a truly human life; any other life is subhuman. Of course, it is true that in a world of sinners the law, regrettably, has to give itself to the task of curbing and rebuking antisocial and degrading practices, but OT law has, to a far greater extent, the function of liberating man to live according to his true nature. For it is only when man finds the law of liberty that he becomes free. For this reason the OT asserts that the law has been given for our good, to bring us to a hitherto unrealised fullness of life (Deut. 4:1; 5:33; 8:1).<sup>31</sup>

This long quote makes it clear to us that we cannot talk of God, pejoratively, as being legal or legalistic. His is the law of love and necessarily the law of liberty. Nor may we say that the Trinity was subsistent without law, *before* law, for the law has ever been as God has ever been. In a sense God cannot have Man without Man having the law of God, which is prior to Man but essential for his true being. Thus to sin against law is not to sin against a set of difficult legislation of a moralistic nature, but is to sin against the natures of both God and Man, and it is this violation which necessarily brings God's wrath upon Man. If He were not

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<sup>31</sup> Motyer, J. A., 'Law, Biblical concept of' in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 624. Note that we quote only two sub-sections, 'Law in the Image of God' and 'A Truly Human Life'.

wrathful against such deliberate violation of God's being and Man's, then He would be an immoral being. It is at this point that we may now introduce the fact that human beings are not separate individuals who carry on their particular lives of rebellion, nor do they do such apart from an evil system in which, by their sin, they are now entrenched.

If the law is so beautiful and so remarkable then why is it that the law is held by many, not just in holy, reverent fear, but in heart-sickening dread, or just in anger and hatred? Why is it that so many are glad to be free by grace from the law, exulting—wrongly—that they now do not have to obey the law. That ogre has been dispatched! The answer is that to go against God's law is to go against God, for there is no such thing as God's law detached from Him. To be confronted by law alone must be both bewildering and frightening. Even what we call 'hard copy' of the law was spoken by God Himself. Spoken (soft copy) or written (hard copy), it is still the Ten Words spoken by God. He speaks to a person or a people. It is a matter of conscience that we either see law as delightful and the law of liberty (cf. James 2:12; Ps. 19:7–8; 119:32, 45; etc.) or as severe legislation, demanding more than we can be expected to deliver, and seeming to threaten us if we do not. Paul makes it clear that the conscience which is pure sees all things as pure and delights to worship God (Titus 1:15; cf. Heb. 9:14).

We need to go back to Eden and the fall of Man and see by it that rebellious Man did not agree with God and the commission God had given him to accomplish in this world, but Man had agreed with the word of the serpent in contradistinction to the

word of God. His fall was not slight but deeply reprehensible: his culpability was huge, his sin a violation of the great and beautiful holiness of God. It was also a rejection of the law of God with all that we have just said; Man refusing to recognise it as his very own law and the true way of life as it is set out so wonderfully in Psalms 1, 19 and 119. In innocence Man delights in the law of God. In guilt he hates it from the heart and deems its precepts as legalistic and burdensome.

If we can grasp the true nature of law then we can see the immense burden which comes upon the conscience and so upon the spirit and the psyche of a human being when that person goes against the law. Just bringing a painful punishment to the Son in the Cross will do nothing to rid the race of the wrath that is being revealed from heaven upon it. Only in a Gilbert and Sullivan opera can 'the punishment fit the crime'. Indeed it is questionable whether any punishment has ever *fitted* any crime. The punishment of sin which is the guilt of sin would have to be borne by the sinner and this would be no less than hell: only if Christ can in some way bear the guilt of sin would that sin be dealt with fully. Christ, in the atonement of the Cross, would have to bear the *guilt* of the sinner which is the same as saying he would be bearing the punishment which *is* guilt, and which is God's wrath. How, then, could such a bearing take place? The closest we have to an explanation in human experience is that of substitution, but then whilst, conceivably at law, a man could take the punishment prescribed by law, he would still not bear the guilt of that person. No man can bear the

sin of another which he has not committed. Not being guilty, how can he become guilty? The answer to that—if an answer is possible—would explain the only way one person could bear the wrath on sin, that is, the guilt of sin, would be to become that very person, that guilty person.

If there is no person who can vicariously bear the sin of Man then what must be the outcome of the human race? If the work of the Cross, that is, the work of propitiation is not vicarious in that somehow Christ becomes the authentic sin-bearer and the receiver of the wrath of God on all sin, then nothing has been accomplished. We are forced to say that his commendable action of dying for the human race really has no viable rationale. One way out is to say that God being omnipotent can do anything, even to forgiving a person of his/her sin, as they say, 'Just like that!' Of course God has declared Himself in saying, as he did to Moses, when:

The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, *but who will by no means clear the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation' (Exod. 34:6–7).

Firstly, we see that God was speaking within the covenant He has made with Israel, and also from it. Secondly, we see that He will not forgive the unrepentant sinners, even though they be in the covenant. When we look at the covenant itself we see all provisions for forgiveness are set out,

especially in the bloody sacrifices, not least of which was the yearly atonement. We also see from Leviticus 17:11 that God in His grace has given them the sacrifice of atonement, 'For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and *I have given it for you* upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life'.

It is clear that somewhere there is a moral dilemma if God directly forgives a person without atonement. The moral dilemma is in the nature of both God and Man. What many miss is the enormity of sin. As we have pointed out, the so-called least sin is itself a gigantic attack upon the law of God, and thus an attack upon the God who is holy, righteous and true. The vastness and terrible nature of this extensive act cannot be computed. It certainly needs something to happen so that the sin can be forgiven. The old theological term 'satisfaction' is both inadequate and adequate. By nature of the case nothing that Man can offer would be adequate. The working must come from within the Divine Being and virtually it must be satisfactory. The mind boggles at what the atoning work must be for the sins of the entire race. The so-called 'bare' substitution would seem to be inadequate, but then, what if an adequate, vicarious work could be effected from *within* the Godhead? The theological complaint would be that Man was not offering what he ought to offer for the desecration—not of a piece of legislation after the order of Roman jurisprudence, but of the holy relational law of the God who made Man *in* His own image to be His image within the whole of creation, in order

that he be partner to God in His plan for all history. If Man could not bear his own sin, then how could he, from himself, fulfil the right demands of God?

### **MAN OFFERS TO GOD A TRUE PROPITIATION BY MEANS OF A MAN**

The answer to our question lies in many Scriptures. In the Old Testament the first offering was undoubtedly that given by Cain and Abel. We cannot be sure what were the elements of these primary sacrifices, but they were an action designed to relate to God, or express an already existing relationship. Cain's offering was rejected because he did not 'do well' (Gen. 4:7). Wenham translates 4:6–7 as follows, 'Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry and why has your face fallen? Is there not forgiveness if you do well? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its urge is for you, but you must rule over it."<sup>32</sup> If the statement, 'Is there not forgiveness if you do well?' is correct, then the sacrifices of Cain and Abel were linked with propitiatory action. Abel offered his sacrifice through faith (Heb. 11:4) and it was accepted. 'Through faith' is Paul's claim for true gospel. Only by faith in the God who set forth Christ as a propitiation for sins is one accounted righteous, that is, justified (Rom. 3:24–25). We have touched on the fact of the propitiatory nature of the sacrifices in Israel. The writer of Hebrews

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<sup>32</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1, Word, Waco, 1987, pp. 93ff.

acknowledges that Christ was made 'a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people' (Heb. 2:17; 5:5). The writer also teaches that whatever was the value of the Levitical sacrifices in Israel they were never able to do what Christ did in his offering of himself to God. We saw that both John and Paul refer to Christ's work of the Cross as being the propitiation that God Himself had set forth (Rom. 3:25; 1 John 4:10).

The New Testament writers use a number of statements which conduct us to the nature of Christ's work on the Cross. These are: 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin'; 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness'; 'For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God'; and 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures'. There are many more statements both explicit and implicit but these, linked with the Gospels' accounts and the preaching of the Apostles, give us something of a view of Christ's death and passion.

Jesus in the Last Supper had indicated the wine stood for his blood to be shed as the blood of the New Covenant, and likewise the bread was his flesh 'for you' (1 Cor. 11:24). Whatever other values and meanings are in or derive from this event, the forgiveness of sins was the prominent one. First Peter 2:24, 'He himself bore our sins in his body' is a powerful statement.<sup>33</sup> What does it mean

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<sup>33</sup> Properly translated, 1 Peter 2:24 would read, 'He himself carried our sins to the cross, so that we, having parted with those sins, might live for what is right'. See *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 49, by J. Ramsey Michaels (Word, Waco, 1988), p. 148. It is interesting that no regular translation carries this full expression of the Greek, and this would be linked with the number of times in Isaiah 53 when the Suffering Servant is said to bear the sins of many, especially in verse 12.

to bear sins? Ezekiel 18:20 makes it clear that it is (only) the soul that sins that shall die:

The soul that sins shall die. The son *shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.*

In Leviticus the sacrifices are explained: the priest completes the sacrifice-making atonement for the sin which the offerer has committed 'and he shall be forgiven'. When the offerer is atoned for, then his particular sin is finished; God remembers it against the offerer no more. What, then, if he makes no offering? The answer is that he must go on bearing his iniquity. In this case to bear (*nasa*) in Hebrew means 'to suffer'. Cain complained to God that his sin was greater than he could bear. Ezekiel 18 makes it clear that the one who sins shall die for his sin. Meanwhile that one shall 'bear' or 'suffer for' or 'suffer' his sin/s.

In looking at Psalms 32 and 38 we saw the wrath that went with and for the sins of the psalmists. In Romans 1:18–32 we saw Man was given up to his sin and that Man was bearing the guilt of his sin. As it enlarged, he undoubtedly

suffered more. The bearing of one's sins, that is, one's guilt, is inescapable. When, then, we come to Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12, which is the Fourth Servant Song, we see the Suffering Servant as he has long been called. Here as in no other place we have a picture of one bearing sins which are not his own, suffering for what he has not done, a person who has the iniquity (guilt) of all laid upon him, and who thus justifies many. No wonder this section of Isaiah has troubled many. Does it come fortuitously to hand for those who would see in it a picture of Christ the bearer of the sins of the world? Even if it were not to refer to Christ it would be an amazing example of one who bears sins.

At this juncture we ask ourselves the questions, 'If there is no one to vicariously bear our sins, then what will become of us? Will it be seen that sin-bearing has always been an illusion, that it is a little thing in God's sight that we have broken the law of His and our being? How can we get assurance that there is no need to bear sin at all? Most of all, how can we quieten our consciences so that they do not trouble us for ever?'

We are now at the point where we look to Christ to be as, and to do as, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12. We mind that 'his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the sons of men', that he was really transmogrified into something quite horrible. Does this begin to happen in Gethsemane when 'he began to be sorrowful and troubled', and he said to his disciples, 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death'? Was that the point when he began to take

on him the evil of the world? There he fought out the battle for his life so that he could go to the Cross. The translation of 1 Peter 2:24 noted in footnote 33 tells us he took the sins of the world to the Cross, so it may have been at Gethsemane he began this work. This would seem to mean he was High Priest in his intercession at Gethsemane as he was also as the victim on the Cross. If it is deep anguish for a person to bear his own sin throughout his life, what then of the Person who took on himself the sins of the world? For that he did as surely as he said at the Last Supper that he would. Entering Gethsemane he told them they would all be scandalised because of him that night, in terms of Zechariah 13:7, “Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me,” says the LORD of hosts. “Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered; I will turn my hand against the little ones.”

The Cross certainly turned out to be a scandal, and scandal it was to be especially to the Jews (1 Cor. 1:23). For Christ’s followers to speak of the Cross as a sacrifice was uttering blasphemy since human sacrifices were an abomination. To say that he bore our sins (griefs, pains) and carried our sorrows would be unintelligible to Jewish thinking, in spite of what Isaiah 53 had said. At this point, then, we must try to face the matter of what has been called ‘his redemptive suffering’. His own words from the Cross give us some idea of what he was suffering, for his cries were out of his suffering.<sup>34</sup> For the most part the utterances,

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<sup>34</sup> I have tried to interpret something of the meaning of Christ’s seven words on the Cross in my book, *Christ’s Cross over Man’s Abyss* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1987), pp. 58–86. The classic on the seven words is *Christ Crucified* by K. Schilder, third volume of his ‘Lenten Trilogy’ (Klock and Klock, Minneapolis, 1978).

though rational, cannot be coldly interpreted or even understood. Even so, the words from the Cross begin with Christ’s prayer for his enemies—those involved in the crucifying of him—but then in Adam all members of mankind were enemies of Christ, seeing it was total human sin that drew him to suffer in that death. We see the progression of his suffering to the point where we hear his cry of dereliction, ‘My God! My God! Why hast thou forsaken me?’ It is this cry which has been strongly debated, some claiming that he was—as he cried—forsaken by God. Others see this as scandal—God forsaking His Son—since 2 Corinthians 5:19 says, ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against him’.

It has been said that Jesus is indicating from his cry that he is as the one in Psalm 22. This is of course correct, but as the psalmist had cried out that he was forsaken, so was Christ forsaken, otherwise what transpired in the latter half of the Psalm—from verse 22 to the end—could not have been transpiring. We must first of all realise that he did not cry, ‘My Father! My Father!’ so that it would be incorrect to say that the Father forsook him as the hitherto acknowledged Son. There was no rift in the Trinity. The Three Persons were one in the action of the Cross, though their roles differed. As at the beginning Christ called as Son to the Father, and at the end committed himself

into the Father's hands, so it is clear that the cry of dereliction is a vicarious one, that is, the man Christ Jesus being the man, the redeeming one, on the Cross. When he cried, 'My God! My God!' he was crying as the man for all humanity.

It has been said that according to Habakkuk 1:13 that God is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity and cannot look upon evil, and so He could not look on His Son who was *as* an evil thing bearing the sins of the world. This is a curious idea and lacks understanding of Habakkuk 1:13, 'Thou who art of purer eyes than to behold evil and canst not look on wrong, why dost thou look on faithless men, and art silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?' The prophet, speaking to God about the Chaldeans who are coming to chastise Israel, is saying to God, 'You are our God, and You *see* evil and always punish it, and you cannot see wrong and *not* judge and punish it. You will not let the Chaldeans do this. Being who you are you must judge and punish them.' Of course Habakkuk came to see that God's judgment on Israel had to be. His faith was in God for the true outcome.

On the Cross this was exactly what God was doing in Christ. He was seeing the entire evil of human history and His wrath was upon it. The pain, shame and horror in Jesus as he suffered—the man for men—was surely the peak of his vicarious horror and shock as he sought to sustain himself in the darkness of isolation from God, the very essence of God's wrath upon sin, that is, God's wrath upon sinners. He was in the lonely abyss, in the limbo of the lost, the state Jude describes of

the apostates in verses 12–13, 'These are blemishes on your love feasts, as they boldly carouse together, looking after themselves; waterless clouds, carried along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars for whom the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved for ever'. In this terrifying isolation he gave utterance to his cry of dereliction.

To come back to Romans 1:18–32, Psalm 32:3–4, 38:1–22, and the 63rd chapter of Isaiah, we see now that propitiation worked in Christ. Leon Morris states that propitiation is that which averts the wrath of God, and on the Cross averted it from Man but drew it on to Christ, the one set forth by God to bear the sins of the world as both High Priest and victim of that sacrifice. The whole-hearted rejection by some of God pouring out His wrath upon His own Son has obviously arisen from an assessment of law as a matter of legislation, envisaged as a burden upon Man. It is a failure to see the wonderful nature of law as the law of God, given as a gift to Man in his creation as the image of God. What many fail to see is their innate hatred of law and their caricaturing of it as harsh, legal Roman jurisprudence; something which the jubilant composers of Psalms 1, 19 and 119 had certainly never envisaged. These people cannot understand that on the Cross Christ was bearing the guilt of Man, the guilt which is at once the punishment and the personal wrath of God.

In their misunderstanding is also an anthropomorphic view of God's wrath. They cannot realise that pure wrath is of pure love. If God does not act

to destroy all that is evil by pouring His wrath upon it, then there is no true moral power, authority and love in all the universe. The words, 'wrath', 'anger', and 'fury' have a certain connotation for us which ought not to be associated with God. The ideas of animosity, harshness and irrational fury ought not to be associated with God's wrath, for His wrath is the cure to evil, so that by propitiation which He, Himself, has set forth, the human conscience can at last be set free. Another misunderstanding is that for God to pour out His wrath upon His Son would show Him to be merciless to that beloved one. Wrong: the Son and the Father were one in Christ's going to the Cross. This was their plan in the unity of the Trinity. There could be nothing untoward in the Son bearing the wrath of God on the sin of the world. As for vindictiveness in the act of the Cross—let the thought perish. It was the vindication of sinful Man that God sought and not vindictiveness of any kind. Love poured out wrath and love bore wrath within the Triune Godhead. At the same time it was a man who bore the wrath, who effected the propitiation the Father had chosen.

If Christ had not been one with all sinful humanity then it would have been impossible for God to deal with sin once and for all. The actual suffering of Christ was in bearing the sins—in being made sin for us—so that all the elements of sin's guilt were borne by him. We have seen those elements are what we know, personally, when we sin—the elements we call pain and shame, burden and heaviness, the sense of failure, the sense of pollution, the choking, stifling terror of retribution, the

feelings of alienation, rejection, the intense loneliness, the baffling confusions, the loss of esteem, the feeling of failure, the utter, utter loss of all things, the utter emptiness of being, the non-achievement and the dread of the God who is seen not as love but as wrath. These are the elements of the guilt of sin which we bear, but which he bore, and no wonder this gave vent to his cry of desolation as he bore them in our place. Whatever he felt, he knew the Father had not consigned him to destruction, but only to destroy destruction. What he did was to utterly empty sin of its malignancy, its power over guilty persons, its bondage to evil and idolatry and to the ancient Serpent and his system of evil powers and haughty ambition to be like God and even surpass Him. How did he void sin of its malignancy? By bearing all the elements of human guilt, that is, the intolerable pain, shame, loneliness, alienation, dread, heaviness, burden, confusion, separation, pollution and other innumerable essentials which constitute the components of sin-guilt which is human. *Indeed the sum total of these elements are the wrath of God*—the way He meets us, not in berating and thrashing us, but in giving us up to our sins as we saw in Romans 1:18–32 and especially in verses 24, 26 and 28. These, too, are the elements which Christ suffered when 'God made him to be sin for us', that is, when 'he bore our sins in his body on the tree'. This is what it means when we say, 'The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all'. Again, we say that Christ in entering into human dimensions had to suffer human guilt—which is God's wrath—in human ways in order to experience it to the very

end, after which suffering he cried, 'I thirst!' because his own reserves were called on to the very last. His thirst set flowing the rivers of living waters for the times to come for redeemed Man. His being received by the Father was his rich reward for fulfilling their love pact for saving humanity.

This, then, we can say was 'the wrath of love'. If we make God in our image, then the doctrine of God's wrath will be repugnant, and so we will see it as harsh and even immoral; but if we are made anew in Christ, then we will see that sin demands judgment and we will understand perfectly that not only is God's wrath called for, but also that when it happens in Christ then it is the action which redeems us. That is why we call it 'the wrath of love', something set forth in 1 John 4:10 by John and in Romans 3:25 by Paul and, as we will see, in the text of Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12.

### **CHRIST'S VICARIOUS SUFFERING IN ISAIAH 52:13 – 53:12**

It is not presumption to say that Christ is the one in this long test passage who is the sin-bearer. All four Servant Songs are attributed to Christ who said that he came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). The exposition of this passage would demand much time and print but we will look at it briefly, seeking to understand something of the Servant's vicarious suffering as became the substitute sufferer for Man's sin.

Substitution and vicarious suffering for human sin is objected to by some theologians who see it as impossible of being carried out by God and its being immoral if it were. Our text of Isaiah is amazing in what it opens up. Whilst the Suffering Servant is here bearing the sins of all and this language is understandable in the light of the Book of Leviticus, yet the idea of a man suffering for the sins of many is unique. Isaiah 53:4–6 can only be seen as bearing the iniquity of many (cf. vv. 6, 11, 12).

*Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

Here, without doubt, the suffering is substitutive, vicarious.<sup>35</sup> If this is not the wrath of God upon the Servant, then it would be difficult to know what else it might be. It was certainly not for his own sins. In this case God does not strike the sinners but the Servant. For his part this Victim is silent, not objecting, submitted to his work, bearing the sins and all that it means in terms we have outlined above, that is, in terms of human guilt being borne by one under wrath, we repeat:

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<sup>35</sup> For a full treatment of Isaiah 53:4–6 see Alec Motyer's *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (IVP, London, 1993), pp. 429–31.

By bearing all the elements of human guilt, that is, the intolerable pain, shame, loneliness, alienation, dread, heaviness, burden, confusion, separation, pollution and other innumerable essentials which constitute the components of sin-guilt which is human. *Indeed the sum total of these elements are the wrath of God*—the way He meets us, not in berating and thrashing us, but in giving us, up to our sins as we saw in Romans 1:18–32 and especially in the verses 24, 26 and 28.

This, then, leads us to the nature of propitiation, that is, God's way of averting His wrath from us as He makes Christ the propitiation for our sins (1 John 2:2; 4:10; Rom. 3:25). Leon Morris in his book *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* has traced the *hilaskomai* word group in Old and New Testaments after looking at its usage in non-biblical Greek and in the Septuagint; *hilaskomai* being the verb 'to appease', 'to render propitious', 'to make an atonement or expiation for'. He says that everywhere the word group is used 'when applied to the Deity is the means of appeasing God or placating God, or of averting His anger'. After giving us the fruits of his research Morris gives his conclusion:

Then, too, unless we give a real content to the wrath of God, unless we hold that men really deserve to have God visit upon them the painful consequence of their wrongdoing, we empty God's forgiveness of its meaning. For if there is no ill desert, God ought to overlook sin. We can think of forgiveness as something real only when we hold that sin has betrayed us into a situation where we deserve to have God inflict upon us the most serious consequences. When the logic of the situation demands that He should take action against the sinner,

and He yet takes action for him, then and then alone can we speak of grace. But there is no room for grace if there is no suggestion of dire consequences merited by sin.

One final point is that the process of propitiation envisaged in the Bible is one which involves an element of substitution. In both Old and New Testaments the means of propitiation is the offering up of a gift, the gift of a life yielded up to death by God's own appointment. The Scripture is clear that the wrath of God is visited upon sinners or else that the Son of God dies for them. Either sinners are punished for their misdoings or else there takes place what Hodgson calls 'that self-punishment which combines the activities of punishing and forgiving'. Either we die or He dies. But 'God commendeth his own love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom. 5:8).<sup>36</sup>

### **GOD'S WRATH NOT INTEMPERATE**

There is a theme which runs through the Old Testament, namely that God is not wrathful by nature, and has wrath only when provoked. He is a long-suffering God, and 'slow to anger'. It was Moses who discovered this truth and steadfastly taught it to His people. In Exodus 32 we have the account of the people making the molten calf of gold under the leadership of Aaron:

The LORD in His anger spoke to Moses, 'Go down; for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves; they have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them;

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<sup>36</sup> Morris, *The Apostolic Teaching of the Cross*, chs 5 – 6 (pp. 144–213) covers the matters of propitiation, substitution and the nature of God's wrath.

they have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" And the LORD said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people; now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; but of you I will make a great nation' (Exod. 32:7–10).

The text of Exodus 32:11–35 gives us Moses' response:

But Moses besought the LORD his God, and said, 'O LORD, why does thy wrath burn hot against thy people, whom thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand. Why should the Egyptians say, "With evil intent did he bring them forth, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth"? Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou didst swear by thine own self, and didst say to them, "I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it for ever."''

Moses had seen the great wrath of God upon Egypt in the ten plagues, and feared now for his own people. He also understood their nature, and their concupiscence. It seemed the matter would be hopeless for the future as he tried to lead them into the Promised Land, so that in Exodus 33:12–23 we find him asking God to show him His glory, presumably so that he—Moses—will know whether God will assuredly bring them into the Promised Land and not destroy the people for their sin and complaints by some sudden act of wrath. The answer in 34:6–7 is monumental:

The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.'

The qualities of God in this passage are His revelation of how He will always be and act. These two verses are quoted many times throughout the Old Testament, especially when Israel has sinned grievously. For our purposes the fact that He is 'merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin', should be enough to show us that He is never irrationally wrathful. At the same time He does not pass over sin when sinners are impenitent, for He is holy and righteous.

In Numbers chapter 14 there is the account of Israel murmuring against the Lord, and in this context—verse 18—Moses quotes Exodus 34:6–7 to the Lord. In Psalm 103:8–14 there is a long paraphrase of the Exodus statement. Jonah 4:2, Lamentations 3:33, Isaiah 27:2–4, Hosea 11:9, and Daniel 9:3–19 are other examples of its use. It is in the light of God's covenantal mercy that we understand God's cry to Israel in Ezekiel 18:30–32:

Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, says the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which

you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of any one, says the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.

The fact that God has no pleasure in the death of a sinner is described by Paul in Romans 2:1–11, which was addressed to Jews who thought that the Gentiles merited God's wrath but they, as His covenant people, did not! We need to ponder the text:

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who do such things. Do you suppose, O man, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honour and peace for every one who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality (Rom. 2:1–11).

Verses 4 to 11 remind us very much of God's revelation of His glory in Exodus 34:6–7 and other Old

Testament quotes of it in particular cases which we have seen above. Far from God being irrationally explosive when Israel sinned, we see He exercised kindness, forbearance and patience. He has desired to keep them from wrath but they have ignored this act of His love and in so doing have shown themselves hard-hearted. Paul in the first three chapters of Romans is seeking to show that the whole world is under God's wrath, but that the propitiation Man needs for his sins is to be found in the act of the sacrifice of the Cross—God's plan and method to divert His righteous wrath on sinful humanity from them to His Son, who in his voluntary act of love, saves 'from the wrath to come', at the occasion of the Great Assize (1 Thess. 1:10; cf. Rev. 20:11–15).

All of this should teach us not to judge God's wrath from a human standpoint, that is, from experiences of human wrath which have shocked us, and from actions of our own wrath which have dismayed us.

### **CONCLUSION: THE END OF GOD'S WRATH**

Revelation 15:1 states, 'Then I saw another portent in heaven, great and wonderful, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them *the wrath of God is ended*'. It may be conjectured whether John means that God's wrath in the series of seals, trumpets and bowls of wrath are ended, but the general meaning must be that all God's wrath has been expressed in action and is now about to be completed. After this the wrath of

God will never have cause to be active. He will have completed His plan that wrath will be no more. Here we need to read from Revelation:<sup>37</sup>

Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. He had a little scroll open in his hand. And he set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land, and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring; when he called out, the seven thunders sounded. And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down.' And the angel whom I saw standing on sea and land lifted up his right hand to heaven and swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there should be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, *the mystery of God*, as he announced to his servants the prophets, should be fulfilled (Rev. 5:1–7).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> This small book is not intended to cover all the *acts* of God's wrath in both Testaments of the Bible. It does not cover the acts of His wrath in the Book of the Revelation, the last book of the Bible. In my volume *The Revelation of St John the Divine* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1993), I have included a number of Essays. Essay 10, 'Judgement(s) in the Book of the Revelation' (pp. 289–99) covers much of the matter of God's wrath and should be helpful. The Bibliography in this present book will be helpful in pursuing the theme of God's wrath.

<sup>38</sup> The term 'the mystery of God' means the plan of God. This can be linked with Paul's statements in Ephesians 1:5, 'The purpose of his will'; 1:9, 'the mystery of his will'; 1:11, 'the counsel of his will'; 3:3, 'the mystery of Christ'; 3:9, 'the plan of the mystery'; 3:11, 'the eternal purpose'; and Acts 20:27, 'the whole counsel of God'. The will of God relates to the purpose of God in His plan for His creation, his plan for all history, culminating in the *telos* or goal of God.

This helps us to see that from the rebellion of Man against God in Eden to the opening of the ultimate Eden—the City of God, the New Paradise—to redeemed Man, God has always exercised His wrath against those who reject His commission given to Man in Genesis 1:26–30 and thus His plan of glorification for humanity (cf. 1 Cor. 2:7ff.). Man was created to share in the fulfilment of God's plan and refused to do so, preferring his own plan, and thus the plan of the serpent in the Garden.

God's wrath is not directed just towards certain incidents of sinning by Satan and humans, but against the intentions of Satan, Satanic powers and rebel humans to destroy His plan as they seek to complete their own scheme. When this is seen and the evil intention of the powers of darkness is unmasked, then all objections to God having and exercising wrath are pointless and without a basis.

That every cause for exploiting and denigrating nature is exposed by the wrath of God towards it is a cause for accepting the matter of His wrath. That God has so acted and is acting to destroy every cause of His wrath is a matter of great delight to His people who long for the days of peace in the age to come.

***Wrath Averted***

Cascades of wrath descend on me.  
Have done so all my life.  
In the midst of life there was death—  
Your hot breath upon me.  
In the midst of my sin and guilt,  
The fire of your love was my torture:  
Cascades of wrath always upon me.

Now I cannot escape you,  
Your eyes fixed upon me,  
Warning of love that is a deeper torture  
Than angry hate. Such hate you have not.  
Your love is wrathful at my evil  
And I cannot say you, 'Nay!'  
Nor raise a protest for my own protection.

If your wrath ceases then I am done.  
I am a worm shrivelled, a creature burdened,  
With no future love. I am lost  
In the futility of your rejection,  
Your refusal to honour me  
With the fire of your wrath,  
The cascades of burning zeal  
That must tell me eternally  
That you love this soul of mine.

How, Lord shall I escape?  
How shall I emerge from the torment  
Of your ceaseless love? How shall I regain  
The pristine purity of spirit  
In which you once created me?

Your wrath—my guilt—I surely know,  
But how shall I escape, escape, escape?

Here in my Cross you must come—  
Here when the crowd mocks maniacally  
And calls this the judgment of my Father  
To strike in fury at my mind and heart—  
You must come and hide within me.  
Be crucified with me, be one with me  
For I have myself wholly to be  
One with you. Hide in me  
For the wrath is now cascading  
Out of His heart of love.  
All guilt and pain, all sorrow, heaviness,  
Confusion of spirit, and foulness of pollution—  
These are His wrath you feel.  
Contempt and broken pride, sheer loneliness  
That knows no loving friend—  
These are the things of wrath  
That burn within your conscience.

Ah, strong cascades that empty from  
The Eternal Bosom, fall upon  
The Son He loves, the beloved Son.  
He bears that wrath since he is one with me  
And all my dread and sorrow cease  
In the wrath of love that bears on him  
In place of me. Ah, blessed love  
Of Father and of Son that shelter me  
From wrath that's truly mine,  
The wrath I should endure.

Who can endure such wrath, O Man?  
Be still whilst I endure.

See all your sins, your guilts and shames  
Dissolve in my love, that love that bears for you  
Its holy due. Cascades of human blood  
Or blood of beasts cannot erase the shame  
Of all the human race. There is no power  
But this the holy love that hides you full  
Whilst wrath's full fires expend themselves  
Upon my holy Self. Crucified you are with me  
And risen in peerless purity  
For all eternity. That's love!

*Geoffrey Bingham,  
Kingswood  
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