



Thoughts from the Bible and Books

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Leave Room for God's Wrath: How the Doctrine of Divine Judgment Makes Us More Like Jesus

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It may not be popular, but our confessions are clear: we Reformed Christians believe in the doctrine of eternal punishment. We believe in the wrath of God. The Canons of Dort speak of God's decision to "condemn and eternally punished" the reprobate for "their unbelief" and "all their other sins." For God is a "just judge and avenger." The Belgic confesses that "the evil ones will be convicted by the witness of their own consciences, and shall be made immortal—but only to be tormented in the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Even the irenic Heidelberg Catechism affirms that God "is terribly angry about the sin we are born with as well as the sins we personally commit. As a just judge he punishes them now and in eternity."

There's actually nothing terribly Reformed about this doctrine of eternal punishment. Christians of all stripes have believed in the wrath and justice of God for most of Christian history. It's only been in the last couple of centuries that the doctrine of divine retribution has come under serious attack.

Protestant Liberalism was one of the first to question God's wrath, fearing that it made God look like a heartless, capricious, tyrant. This squeamishness about the hard edges of Christianity is what prompted H. Richard Niebuhr to describe theological liberalism as "a God without wrath who brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."

But the avoidance of hell is not just a "liberal" problem. Evangelicals in recent decades have soft-peddled the doctrine as well, opting instead for a therapeutic God or a nicer theology that seems better suited for a God of love. Likewise, some

missiologists argue that the missionary enterprise should no longer be seen as a venture to save people from hell, but only as an effort to bring God's kingdom of justice and shalom to all people. More recently, emergent church leaders like Brian McLaren have practiced a studied agnosticism about hell and God's wrath, deliberately avoiding the topic in sermons or writing, because, they say, it's not our business who is there—if anyone is there at all.

Jesus was not nearly so equivocal. He warned often of weeping and gnashing of teeth, utter darkness, unquenchable fire, and worms that never die. In fact, most of the New Testament teaching on judgment comes from our Savior. It has been estimated that Jesus talked about judgment and hell more than any other topic (angels are second and love third). More than half of Jesus' parables are about God's wrath on the wicked and unbelieving. Dorothy Sayers is right: "There seems to be a kind of conspiracy, especially among middle-aged writers of vaguely liberal tendency, to forget, or to conceal,

where the doctrine of Hell comes from. One finds frequent references to the 'cruel and abominable mediaeval

doctrine of hell' or 'the childish and grotesque mediaeval imagery of physical fire and worms.' ...But the case is quite otherwise; let us face the facts. The doctrine of Hell is not 'mediaeval': it is Christ's."

If pulpit ministry in the past sometimes suffered from an unhealthy fascination with hell, today's ministers are guilty of an undue ambivalence on the subject. Pastor David Hansen writes, "There is an important place in the ministry for honest questioning over doctrinal issues. But I'm not proud of my tossing and turning over hell. Some pastors wear their agnosticism about hell as a badge of honor. I've tried it. I've acted as if struggling to believe our Lord's words were a virtue. But I always found that when I become proud of my doubts, they suddenly become the sin of unbelief."

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Granted, there is no place for giddiness concerning God's wrath, but isn't there a place for passionate, blood-earnest warning? Isn't it biblical to move past agnosticism about hell and implore people on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God? (2 Cor. 5:20) Could it be that our evangelism languishes, our preaching lacks authority, and our congregations lose focus because we don't have the doctrine of hell to set our face like a flint toward Jerusalem?

We need the doctrine of eternal punishment. Time and time again in the New Testament we find that understanding divine justice is essential to our sanctification. Believing in God's judgment actually helps us look more like Jesus. In short, we need the doctrine of the wrath of God.

Here are seven reasons why:

First, we need God's wrath in order to forgive our enemies. The reason we can forgo repaying evil for evil is because we trust the Lord's promise to repay the wicked. Paul's logic is sound. "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Rom. 12:19). The only way to look past our deepest hurts and betrayals is to rest assured that every sin against us has been paid for on the cross and or will be punished in hell. We don't have to seek vigilante justice, because God will be our just judge.

Second, we need God's wrath in order to risk our lives for Jesus' sake. The radical devotion necessary to suffer for the word of God and testimony of Jesus comes, in part, from the assurance we have that God will vindicate us in the end. That's why the martyrs under the throne cry out "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (Rev. 6:10) They paid the ultimate price for their faith, but their cries will be answered. Their innocence will be established when God finally judges their persecutors.

Third, we need God's wrath in order to live holy lives. Paul warns us that God cannot be mocked. We will reap what we sow. We are spurred on to live a life of purity and good deeds by the promised reward for obedience and the promised curse for disobedience. If we live to please the flesh, we will reap destruction from God. But if we live to please the Spirit, we will reap eternal life (Gal. 6:6-7). Sometimes ministers balk at the thought of motivating people with the threat of eternal punishment. But wasn't this Jesus' approach when he said "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot

kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). Sometimes, we need to literally scare the hell out of people.

Fourth, we need God's wrath in order to understand what mercy means. Divine mercy without divine wrath is meaningless. Only when we know that we were objects of wrath (Eph. 2:3), stood condemned already (John 3:18), and would have faced hell as God's enemies (Rom. 5:10) were it not for undeserved mercy, can we sing out "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!"

Fifth, we need God's wrath in order to grasp how wonderful heaven will be. Jonathan Edwards is famous (or infamous) for his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." It's still read in American Literature classes, usually as a caricature of the puritanical spirit of colonial New England. But few people realize that Edwards also preached sermons like "Heaven is a World of Love." Unlike most of us, Edwards saw in vivid colors the terror of hell and the beauty of heaven. We can't get a striking picture of one without the other. That's why the depiction of the heavenly New Jerusalem also contains a warning to the cowardly, unbelieving, vile, immoral, idolaters, and liars whose place is in "the fiery lake of burning sulfur" (Rev. 21:8). It's unlikely we will long for our final salvation if we don't know what we are saved from.

Sixth, we need the wrath of God in order to be motivated to care for our impoverished brothers and sisters. We all know the saying that Christians are so heavenly minded they are of no earthly good. The idea is that if all we think about are heaven and hell we'll ignore ministries of compassion and social justice. But what better impetus for social justice than Jesus' sober warning that if we fail to care for the least of our brothers we will go away to eternal punishment? (Matt. 25:31-46) The wrath of God is a motivator for us to show compassion to others, because without love, John says, we have no eternal life, and if we don't share our material possessions with those in need we have no love (1 John 2:17).

Seventh, we need God's wrath in order to be ready for the Lord's return. We must keep the lamps full, the wicks trimmed, the houses clean, the vineyard tended, the workers busy, and the talents invested lest we find ourselves unprepared for the day of reckoning. Only when we fully believe in the coming wrath of God and tremble at the thought of eternal punishment will we stay awake, keep alert, and be prepared for Jesus to come again and judge the living and the dead.

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