

Excursis – The Wrath of God

Romans 12:19

May 5, 2019

Introduction:

When I was a child, one of the most threatening statements I could hear uttered was the phrase, “Just wait until your dad gets home.” When my mom made such a statement to me, she did so not because I should anticipate my father bringing me some wonderful gift but rather because I had committed an act of grave disobedience. Whatever my crime, it was of such a heinous nature that it would not be fit for the gentler nature of my mom to handle and instead she had decided to turn over jurisdiction of my case to my father who was certain to enact a significantly harsher penalty.

For the rest of the day, the sword of Damocles would hang over me. My playtime would be tainted by the dread of doom that awaited me once my father would return from work and learn the sordid tale of my insubordination. Would I get a spanking? Be grounded? Lose a particular privilege or access to a beloved toy? Perhaps a combination of these? But no matter what, it would not be good for me once my dad got home. It was no joy to live under the threat of my father’s wrath.

I’d imagine my experience is not unusual. Most of us at some point in our younger years faced the threat of impending punishment from a parent or some other authority figure. And while most of us here have grown out of needing to fear the punishment that can come from our parents, there remains a threat of punishment all people must reckon with when it comes to God. Scripture tells us that God is the ultimate authority figure and one day we’ll all have to give an account to him for the deeds done in our body, for good and for bad. And God’s response to our disobedience is referred to as God’s wrath.

This morning I want to take time to talk about God’s wrath. We’ve been working through the second half of Romans 12 for quite a few weeks now and we’re finally at the very last few verses of it. But in studying for the last of my sermons on Christian birthmarks, I came across a sermon by John Piper that focused on the wrath of God as mentioned in Romans 12:19, that I thought was a worthwhile topic to give special attention to. I talked about the wrath of God back in Romans 1:18 a couple of years ago, but whereas Romans 1 was discussing the wrath of God being revealed against sin in the here and now, our passage today is anticipating the future, final wrath of God.

So it needs to be said right off the bat that I’m indebted to John’s Piper’s message on this passage that both inspired me to give this topic special attention and well as for the basic outline I’m going to be using. So then, let’s take a look at what Scripture has to say about God’s wrath by opening your Bibles to Romans 12:19, which can be found on pg. 948 of the pew Bibles, should you need to use one of those this morning. In the midst of the numerous imperative commands Paul has been giving throughout Romans 12, he says this in v. 19. **“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’”**

We won't be getting into the command to not seek vengeance today – that will wait until next week. For this morning, we want to give our attention to the phrase, “**the wrath of God.**” The whole reason we're not to avenge ourselves is that we're to leave it to God's wrath. So we want to delve into what it is exactly that's meant to stay our hands from seeking out vengeance against those who've wronged us. So the first point today is a matter of definition. We need to first define what this passage says about the wrath of God and then second, we'll consider more broadly what characterizes God's final wrath against sin by looking at a number of other passages of Scripture. So our first question we need to answer is...

1. What is the wrath of God?

I think most of us recognize that wrath is an expression of anger, so we can start by defining the wrath of God simply as God's anger. We can make this connection not only because we understand generally what the word “wrath” means, but also because the idea of wrath and anger is often placed side by side in Scripture. For example, the Jews often used parallelism in their poetic writing, where the second stanza of a line of poetry would be used to restate and reinforce the first. There are numerous places in the Bible where this is done to connect wrath and anger together.

So in Psalm 6:1, David says, “*O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath.*” Then later in Psalm 90 it says, “*We are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed.*” Wrath and anger are connected again in the book of Hosea, in 13:11 where it says, “*I gave you a king in my anger, and I took him away in my wrath.*” I could give many more examples, but I think you get the idea. If we speak of the wrath of God, we're talking about the anger of God.

But God's wrath is further defined by a couple of terms the apostle Paul uses in v. 19. In his quotation from Deut. 32:35, wrath is described as vengeance. “**Vengeance is mine.**” It is also defined as a repayment. God also says, “**I will repay.**” So besides referring to God's anger, we must add to our definition of God's wrath the idea of vengeance and repayment. Something has been done to make God angry that demands there be repayment, that vengeance is necessary.

We know from the rest of Scripture what it is that has kindled the wrath of God. Paul expressed this explicitly in Romans 1:18, where he stated, “*For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.*” It is our sin, our disobedience, the deeds of wickedness and unrighteousness that have kindled God's wrath.

So perhaps a more robust definition of God's wrath would be this: God's wrath is the anger of God provoked by our sin that results in vengeful repayment against us. That's a good definition in light of this particular passage and in light of the whole teaching of Scripture. Our sinful disobedience has an effect on God. He doesn't passively and apathetically look on as we commit deeds of wickedness and rebellion against him. God is angry about our sin and intends to respond to it by repaying us for it.

Now this is not a very popular concept these days. Our popular culture, if they bother to think of God at all, prefer to emphasize his love. They would rather think of God as more of a loving grandfather who never gets mad at anything, who's always accepting and wants for us to be happy, regardless of what we do. Now I wouldn't want to in any way downplay the love of God. Love is a central defining characteristic of God. There are no shortage of passages in the Bible that speak of God's loving kindness, of his grace, his mercy, and his compassion.

But the love of God alone does not give us the full picture. The Bible also frequently speaks of the holy wrath of God, of his anger against sin and his judgement against it. We need to both understand the love of God and the wrath of God if we're to have an accurate picture of him. To focus only on God's love while ignoring or denying God's wrath is to create a false view of God, a caricature that distorts our vision of how he has revealed himself in Scripture.

So it would serve us well to consider carefully this often-neglected aspect of God's character, both because of how our wider culture either downplays it or denies it, and because it's so clearly taught in Scripture and is often used as a motivator for how we're to live, such as it is here in Romans 12:19. Now back in Romans 1 we spoke about God's wrath as a present reality, as something being revealed right now as a result man's unrighteousness. But in our passage today, Paul is referring to the final wrath of God that will come in the future. The prohibition against avenging yourself is set against the future reality of God's coming wrath. **“Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God.”** We can resist the desire to take revenge now because in the future, God will see that justice is done.

For the rest of our time then, I want to highlight four important aspects of God's future, final wrath. We need to understand what will characterize the wrath of God that is to be fully and finally revealed at the Last Day. It is essential we examine what Scripture says about it with sober-minded seriousness because this isn't an abstract theological or philosophical topic. It is what our sins have earned us and what awaits each of us unless we repent of our sins and cast ourselves on the mercy of Christ Jesus. So then, now that we've defined the wrath of God, we need to answer the next question, our second point for this morning, which asks...

2. What will characterize the final wrath of God?

There are four characteristics I think are especially important for us to remember about the final wrath of God, and the first is this...

a. The final wrath of God will be eternal

God's final wrath is manifest by being excluded from heaven and instead cast into hell. But hell is not a temporary holding place for unrepentant sinners, such that it is like the Roman Catholic teaching on Purgatory where sinners suffer for a time while their sins are being purged in order to make them fit eventually for heaven. Hell is permanent. Those who end up there never will escape.

This was something Jesus spoke of frequently. In Mark 9:43-48, Jesus has this to say about the duration of God's wrath:

“And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.”

Twice Jesus referred to the fires of hell as being “unquenchable.” They aren't going to stop. Unlike a fire we might have at a campsite, where as the wood burns up the fire dies down, the fire of God's wrath will not cease in its intensity.

Then in Matthew 25, Jesus tells the parable of the sheep and the goats. To those who are wicked, we're told that God will say to them, *“Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”* The fires of hell are not temporary: they are eternal; they'll never end. And to further drive this idea home, Jesus says this a few verses later, *“These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”* Eternal punishment and eternal life are parallel. Just as our reward in heaven is everlasting, so also is God's punishment everlasting.

But Jesus isn't the only one who makes this point. In speaking of the return of Christ at the end of the age, the apostle Paul has this to say in 2 Thess. 1:7-9...

“The Lord Jesus [will be] revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.”

The idea of destruction here doesn't mean they are annihilated, such that they cease to exist. Rather, it carries the idea of being completely defeated, such as an enemy army might be destroyed: it doesn't mean the soldiers don't exist any longer, only that they have been undone. And for the wicked, this final defeat is eternal. They will be forever excluded from the presence of the glory of the Lord.

We are also given a clear picture of this in the book of Revelation. The apostle John tells us in Rev. 14:11 that *“The smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night.”* Then in Rev. 19:3 he speaks of hell saying, *“The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.”*

So the first thing we need to see is that God's wrath against sin, expressed in hell, is eternal. It will never end. In light of that, the second characteristic of God's wrath follows from the first, and this is this...

b. The final wrath of God will be terrible

We have an abysmally incorrect notion of hell that floats around our culture which paints a picture of hell as either being a kingdom where Satan and all the devils reign supreme or even worse, as a place where bad people will go and continue to enjoying doing bad things, as if it were a vacation club for tyrants and psychopaths. Let's dispel any such cartoony versions of hell immediately. God's wrath isn't like the parent who sent Johnny to his room as punishment for being bad, only to find out Johnny was quite happy there because it allowed him to play his Xbox and text his friends all night without interruption. God's wrath is a terrible thing and nowhere is it described as a place when the devil rules the roost or the wicked delight in.

Quite the contrary, consider some of the ways God's wrath is spoken of. Jesus describes it like this in Matthew 12:41-42,

"The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Furthermore, in Matt. 24:51, in picturing God as a master who returns only to find his servant disobeying his commands, Jesus says he will *"cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* Jesus pictures it as a place of darkness, saying in Matt. 8:12 the unbelieving Jews will be *"thrown into outer darkness."* Then in Mark 9:48 Jesus quotes from Isaiah saying for those who have rebelled against God, *"The worm does not die and the fire is not quenched."* And in Revelation 6, the apostle John says the wrath of God will be so fierce and terrible that people will ask for the rocks to crush them rather than face God's wrath. It says there in v. 15-16 of Revelation 6,

"Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb.'"

Now some people may try to soften the blow here by insisting that these are only symbols. Very well; they may be. But if they are symbolic language, if we aren't to take these hellish descriptions of fire literally, that doesn't lessen the threat; rather, it intensifies it. People don't use symbolic language to describe something horrible if normal, straightforward language would do the job just fine. It's used because the reality is far worse than the symbol.

I like how John Piper describes this. He says, "If I say, 'My wife is the diamond of my life,' I don't want you to say, 'Oh, he used a symbol of something valuable; it's only a symbol. So his wife must not be as valuable as a diamond.'" No. I used the symbol of the most valuable jewel I could think of because my wife is far more precious than

jewels. Honest symbols are not used because they go beyond reality, but because reality goes beyond words.” (<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/gods-wrath>)

So we should pause here and look with eyes wide opened what Scripture is telling us about God’s wrath. God’s wrath is terrible beyond description and it is eternal. At least when we’re suffering, we can find some reprise in sleep or medicine or in death, but none of that is available to those suffering God’s final wrath against them in hell. This should frighten you beyond anything you can imagine. It does me. No horror film can depict a situation worse than this, and yet all movies are fictitious; God’s wrath is not. It is real and it is coming. Every sinner deserves this and every one of us is a sinner, without exception. This isn’t what may possibly happen; it is what will happen should we remain in our sins, unrepentant until death.

But why must God’s wrath come against us? Is this not the unprovoked and irrational anger of an implacable deity? Not at all. Instead, God’s wrath is the just response of a holy God against sin. So moving on to our third characteristic of God’s final wrath...

c. The final wrath of God will be just

When my dad was younger, he told me his father would come home after drinking at the bar angry and irritable. My grandfather would then begin to yell and curse at my grandmother and hit her. When my dad tried to intervene to protect her, he would find himself at the receiving end of my grandfather’s fists. My grandfather’s drunken rage was an irrational, unjust anger. Neither my dad nor my grandmother deserved his violent behavior.

But God’s wrath is not at all like my grandfather’s alcohol-fueled rage. God’s wrath is a just anger, directed rationally against human rebellion against him. It is a wrath deserved, a punishment fitting the crime. In Romans 1 we were told the reason for God’s wrath coming against us. The truth of God had been made known through what God made and yet we neither gave him thanks for honored him. Instead, we rejected him and began to worship what was created instead of the Creator. So as a result, God’s wrath was kindled against us, for our unrighteous rejection of him.

Paul says this even more clearly in Romans 2:15. He says, *“Because of 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.”* God’s wrath comes not without reason. Our sin, our rebellion, our rejection of him, our continuous choosing to live for our own desires instead of submitting our lives to God, is what has earned us the wrath of God. It’s God’s just response to our sinful rebellion.

And let us remember that this is not a matter of only one or two sins, as if we could accuse God of overkill in his vengeance. We have sinned countless times, and in ways far more serious than we may initially regard them to be. In James 2:10 we are told this, *“For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.”* So that means not only have we sinned specifically in breaking a particular commandment, like “You shall not steal,” but in so doing we

have become guilty of breaking all of the law, since ultimately the summary of the law is to love God and love others, and so any specific violation of one command is in essence a breaking of the whole of it.

Furthermore, we need to remember just who it is we're sinning against. A sin against another finite human being is a sin of a finite nature. And of course the higher the position of the person, the more serious the offense. It's one thing to punch your neighbor in the face, but quite another if you punched the President of the United States! But to sin against an infinitely holy and glorious God, the Creator and Lord of the universe, well, that is an infinite offense and infinite dishonor. Therefore, the punishment fits the crime: an infinite, eternal punishment is justly deserved for sinning against an infinite, eternal God.

So God's final wrath against us is eternal, terrible beyond description, and just: we are getting what we deserve. But one more point needs to be made and it's the most important one of all that we who live on this side of eternity need to hear...

d. The final wrath of God is escapable

Though the wrath of God is what we've all earned for our sins, it's not unavoidable. The same Scripture that warns us of the wrath of God tells us of the love of God. It gives us the promise that in spite of God's righteous anger towards us, he loved us such that he gave his own Son, Jesus Christ, so that whoever believes in him would not perish by suffering God's eternal wrath in hell but instead have eternal life.

How is this possible? It's because Jesus took the punishment we deserved for our sin. The wrath that we've been speaking of throughout this sermon fell upon Jesus instead of us. On the cross, Jesus acted as our sinless substitute. He never sinned, so he wasn't guilty of anything for which God would need to justly punish him. As a result, Christ could serve as our substitute, acting in our stead, enduring God's wrath against our sin on the cross. And since Jesus is the eternal Son of God, his life and death are of infinite value, so he could die not just for one man but for an infinite number of men. Therefore, Christ suffered God's wrath in our place, for our sin.

So the wrath of God is escapable, but only through Christ. If anyone would turn from their sin in repentance and believe God's promises that Christ died for your sins, you will find full forgiveness. If you trust in him, though you die, you will be raised to new life, not to judgment in hell but to glory in heaven. God's wrath is part of the story, and we must tell it, but it is not the whole story. God's love, mercy, and grace is also part of that story and it is that which allows our lives to have an alternative ending.

My friends, the story of your life, provided you continue in your sin, will not end well. Experiencing God's wrath for all eternity in hell is how the final chapter of your book will end should you persist in sin and unbelief. But it doesn't need to end that way. The hope of every fairy tale is true: we can live happily ever-after. The story of your life can have a happy ending, but it is only found by escaping the wrath of God by trusting in Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

Conclusion

So as I close, I recognize this is not a light-hearted topic. Talking about God's wrath never is. There's nothing whimsical about it. It's the most serious matter we can discuss. But we do ourselves no favors by avoiding it or denying it. God's final wrath against our sin is real. It is spoken of repeatedly and clearly throughout Scripture, most frequently from the lips of Jesus himself. It's what awaits every person should they persist in their sins. So I make no apologies for spending an entire sermon on it. We need to hear what Scripture says about it so we're neither deceived by our culture nor caught unaware by our ignorance.

But oh what joy that God's wrath is not the final word! God's love triumphs over judgment. In Christ, a Savior is to be found, once who suffered God's wrath for you. So if you do not yet know Christ as your Lord and Savior, why wait any longer? You do not know the days allotted to you. At any moment your life could end and you be ushered into the presence of your fearful and terrible Judge. Would you rather not meet him as Savior and Friend? Then turn to Christ! Cast your sins upon him and find in him the only shelter from the coming storm of God's wrath.

Please join me now as I close us in a time of prayer. Let's pray.