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Hebrews #29

Is the God of Love also a God of Wrath?

Hebrews 10:26-31

This passage in Hebrews 10 makes a lot of people extremely uncomfortable. More than a few of you were probably squirming in your seats as I read it just a moment ago. And it isn't primarily because it seems to suggest that a Christian can lose his/her salvation. That, of course, is an important issue that I'll take up shortly. No, I'm referring to the language here that speaks of such things as judgment, the fury of fire consuming sinful people, punishment, and vengeance.

It's easy to think about and even to preach on the subject of God as love. Grace and mercy are not difficult topics. Forgiveness and salvation are among our favorite biblical themes. But when it comes to the idea of judgment and the suggestion that this God of love and mercy is also a God of wrath and vengeance, well, that's another matter. After all, no one criticizes God for being kind and merciful. But we live in a day when people jump at the opportunity to pass judgment on God's character whenever his holiness and righteous anger are the topic of discussion.

The doctrine or concept of *divine wrath* and *anger* is thought by many to be beneath God. Some have insisted that the notion of divine wrath is *archaic* and that the biblical terminology refers to no more than "an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe." In other words, divine wrath is an impersonal force operative in a moral universe, not a personal attribute or disposition in the character of God. Wrath may well be ordained and controlled by God, but is clearly no part of him, as are love, mercy, kindness, etc.

People who take this view have clearly misunderstood what the Bible has in view when it speaks of judgment and divine wrath. It is not the loss of self-control or the irrational and capricious outburst of anger. Divine wrath is not to be thought of as a celestial bad temper or God lashing out at those who "rub him the wrong way." Divine wrath is *righteous antagonism toward all that is unholy. It is the revulsion of God's character to that which is a violation of God's will.* Indeed, one may speak of *divine wrath* as a function of *divine love*! For *God's wrath is his love for holiness and truth and justice.* It is because God passionately loves purity and peace and perfection that he reacts angrily toward anything and anyone who defiles them. J. I. Packer explains it this way:

"Would a God who took as much pleasure in evil as He did in good be a good God? Would a God who did not react adversely to evil in His world be morally perfect? Surely not. But it is precisely this adverse reaction to evil, which is a necessary part of moral perfection, that the Bible has in view when it speaks of God's wrath" (*Knowing God*, 136-37).

Think about this for just a moment. If you and I do not deserve to suffer divine wrath for our sins, we empty God's forgiveness of its meaning. If there is no such thing as judgment, God *ought* to overlook our sin. ***Forgiveness is real and meaningful only when we believe that our sin has put us into a situation where we deserve to have God inflict upon us the most serious consequences for our unbelief and immoral behavior.*** When a situation demands that God should take action *against* sinful people in judgment and instead he takes action *for* them, the word grace actually means something. But if there is no such thing as the judgment of God's wrath for sin and unbelief, grace loses all meaning and significance.

Whatever your view of God, the Creator of the universe and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, if it does not include a healthy confession that he is holy and righteous and will pour out wrath and judgment on those who persist in their rejection of him, it is an unbiblical and unrealistic view. In fact, it is an ***unloving view***. For if you communicate to non-Christians that they should repent and believe the gospel, but if they don't, "Aw, don't worry about it, God will figure out a way to embrace you in spite of your unbelief," you are treating that person with contempt. ***You are leaving them vulnerable to eternal damnation with the false hope of a God who is too loving ever to consign anyone to hell.***

As John Piper has said, "The love of God provides escape from the wrath of God by sacrificing the Son of God to vindicate the glory of God in forgiving sinners. That's the gospel." But for those who spurn the provision of God's love in Christ there is only a fearful expectation of judgment.

So let me be as clear as I can be. ***I will not apologize for God's wrath. I am not embarrassed by God's wrath.*** If the God of the Bible didn't care about sexual abuse and injustice and theft and murder and idolatry, he's not worthy of anyone's worship. If the God of the Bible is ***unmoved by and indifferent toward*** racism and perversion and abortion and rape and dishonesty, he's not worthy of anyone's praise. ***Righteous anger against sin is absolutely essential to God being God.*** Punishment for human wickedness and wrath poured out on unrepentant rebels is part of what it means to be holy. And I will not ignore or tip-toe around what the Bible says on this matter in order not to offend people or to ensure that people who give financially continue to do so.

The God of the Bible, the only true God, is indescribably patient and kind and compassionate and loving and gracious and merciful. But that doesn't mean he's soft on sin or akin to that coddling, overly-indulgent grandfather who lets you get away with stuff your parents would never allow. God is holy and righteous and just and bears no resemblance to some doting, spineless uncle who lacks the will to hold anyone accountable for their actions.

So let's turn our attention to this scenario described by our author in vv. 26-31. Before we do, please don't overlook the word **"for"** with which v. 26 opens. This is his way of telling us why there is such urgency in "not neglecting to meet together" for mutual encouragement (v. 24-25). In other words, he exhorts us to stir up one another to love and good works and to encourage each other precisely because this is the means he has set in place to keep us on the path of righteousness and to help us avoid apostasy.

The Nature of the Sin of Apostasy

Let's take note of the particular expression of sin that our author has in view. There are several characteristics that should be noted.

(1) This is not a one-time sin or single act of unbelief or rebellion. The words **"go on sinning deliberately"** indicate that he's talking about someone who ***persistently and without repentance continues over time to consciously and willfully rebel against God*** notwithstanding their knowledge of the truth of the gospel. He's not talking about inadvertent sin or occasional lapses in our faith. He's talking about a hard-hearted and calloused rebellion that settles in over time.

(2) For this person ***"there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins"*** (v. 26b). This doesn't mean that the sacrifice of Christ is ineffective or incapable of removing the guilt of such sin. It means that the person who sins in this way willfully ***turns his back on and repudiates the only sacrifice available to him***: the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. There is no other sacrifice that can help him. If he turns his back on Christ, if he willfully cuts himself off from the sole means of forgiveness, he won't find anywhere else a sacrifice that can atone for his guilt.

(3) In v. 29 this person is described as having ***"trampled underfoot the Son of God."*** The words "Son of God" suggest that the person denies that Jesus is God incarnate. *He denies the deity of Jesus Christ*. Worse than denial, this is to treat Jesus and his identity as God incarnate and his atoning death on the cross with utter contempt. It is to say that Jesus as the Son of God who died for sinners is worthless, on the same level as garbage on the ground that one would consciously crush under one's feet. One commentator strings together a series of phrases to describe this despicable attitude toward Jesus. It is a ***"sneering rejection of Jesus,"*** a ***"rebellious denial"*** of him, a ***"supercilious contradiction"*** of his superiority to everything in the Old Testament, a

“*callous abandonment*” of our great High Priest, and a “*contemptuous repudiation* of him who uniquely is the Son of God, eternal, incarnate, crucified, risen, and glorified” (Philip E. Hughes, 422).

(4) Furthermore, this sin is such that this person “*has profaned the blood of the covenant*” (v. 29b). The word “profaned” means he looks at the blood of Jesus Christ shed on Calvary as common. There’s nothing special about it. The death of Jesus is no different from the death of any other human being. However, if the word means that he regards the blood of Jesus as “unclean,” as some contend, he would be saying that Jesus deserved to die, that he was a sinner like us all and he got what was coming to him!

(5) The final characteristic of this unimaginably horrific sin is that he “*has outraged (or, insulted) the Spirit of grace*” (v. 29c). He or she has in effect spit in the face of God and dishonored, disrespected, and insulted everything we know to be true of the Holy Spirit.

The Consequences of the Sin of Apostasy

Again, the consequences of this willful, persistent repudiation of Christ are explained in several ways.

(1) There is a “*fearful expectation of judgment*” (v. 26). Part of the problem in today’s world is that those who persist in their denunciation of Jesus Christ and mock and ridicule him have become so hardened and blinded to who God is that they have no “fear” of impending judgment (see Rom. 3:18). But they should. The question for us is whether or not we have the courage and conviction to speak this warning to those who once professed Christ but have since turned from him. Or do we turn a blind eye to their hardness of heart and pretend that all is well? But remember this: when you speak to someone of “the fearful expectation of judgment,” do it not with a glare of contempt but with tears in your eyes.

(2) There is reserved for them “*a fury of fire that will consume*” God’s adversaries (v. 26). The word “fire” is almost always descriptive of divine retributive judgment, as seen in such texts as Psalm 79:5-6; Isaiah 26:11; Zephaniah 1:18; 3:8.

(3) This punishment is said to be “*worse*” than that which came upon those who defied and disobeyed the Law of Moses during the time of the Old Testament (v. 28). Remember that the theme of Hebrews is that Jesus is better than and greater than and superior to all that came before him under the Law of Moses. It only stands to reason that the punishment one suffers for rejecting Christ would be *more severe* than the punishment one received for rejecting Moses.

(4) Lastly, look at vv. 30-31 where what one can expect who repudiates Christ is divine **“vengeance”** and judgment which he then summarizes as falling into the hands of the living God. There’s no way around it, folks. He’s talking about hell. Eternal condemnation. Separation forever from the presence of God and his glory.

The Perpetrators of the Sin of Apostasy

But now we turn to the difficult part of this passage. We must determine who are the perpetrators of this horrific sin. Are they Christians, and if so, does this mean they lose their salvation? Or are they people who know much about the gospel and profess faith in Christ and seem to be a part of the people of God, but are still unregenerate and unsaved?

Some argue that the issue is decisively settled in v. 26. There it says that such people commit this sin **“after receiving the knowledge of the truth.”** But this doesn’t necessarily mean they are saved. May I remind you of the parable of the sower where Jesus describes the preaching of the gospel and the various responses to it. He refers to one kind of unbelieving human heart that “hears the word and immediately receives it with joy” (Matt. 13:20). In other words, this sort of person understands the gospel and even professes to believe it. But “he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately falls away” (v. 21).

People in our churches often hear and understand the gospel and give mental assent to its claims or profess agreement with it. Tragically, many people hear the good news and commit themselves to shape their lives by the ethics of Jesus and in accordance with the standards and life of a local church while never experiencing regeneration and placing their personal trust in Christ for salvation. They then turn from what they have heard and understood and openly and defiantly repudiate it as false. There are unsaved theologians and biblical commentators whose “knowledge of the truth” of Christianity, at least in terms of objective data, is more extensive and insightful than that held by some true believers.

But the troubling phrase in this passage is in v. 29 where this person is said to have regarded as unclean “the blood of the covenant **by which he was sanctified.**” Does this mean a genuine Christian is in view? Those who affirm eternal security have pointed to several possible interpretations.

First, some have suggested that the “he” who is sanctified is actually Jesus Christ, not the apostate. This is grammatically possible. It is also theologically possible, as John 17:19 speaks of Jesus “sanctifying” himself. We must remember that “to sanctify” can mean “to set apart for a special purpose or use” without the notion of sin being involved (see also similar language and thought in Heb. 2:10; 5:9; and 9:11-12). Thus, according to this view, a parallel exists between the consecration of Aaron as High Priest by the blood of the sacrifice (see Exodus 29) and the consecration of Jesus as High Priest through the shedding of his own blood.

Second, it may be that this passage contains a **warning** of what *would* happen if a true believer were to apostatize and repudiate Christ, but such will in fact *never* happen, because God has promised to keep his children safe and saved. If you think this is strange, hold on. It is said of Jesus in John 7:1 that “he would not go about in Judea because the Jews were seeking to kill him.” But there was no way possible for Jesus to be killed before the appointed time of his death on the cross. Still, Jesus avoided Judea because this was the means whereby God’s plan was brought to pass.

The author of Hebrews doesn’t assert that they *have* fallen away but rather admonishes them so that they *won’t*. In other words, ***the warnings are designed to awaken and empower and motivate Christians to escape the threatened consequence***. Thus the Lord uses such warnings as the means by which he prompts his people not to apostatize. None of God’s elect will fail to heed the warning and thus all will persevere. Many find this unpersuasive and insist that if Christians cannot in fact fall away from the faith it is meaningless to warn them not to. But consider Acts 27.

During the course of Paul’s journey to Rome, a life-threatening storm erupted on the sea. Everyone’s life was in danger, including that of Paul himself. In the middle of this storm Paul spoke to the crew on board:

“Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, ‘Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. Yet now I urge you to take heart, for *there will be no loss of life among you*, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, “Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.” So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told” (Acts 27:21-25; emphasis mine).

The divine promise is clear: no one will die as a result of this life-threatening weather. Nevertheless, a number of the sailors clearly didn't believe Paul and thus prepared a life-boat in order to jump ship.

“And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, ‘Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.’ Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it go” (Acts 27:30-32).

Wait a minute! Didn't Paul say that God had promised that no one would die? Yes. But now he warns them that if they leave the ship they will die! How does that work? Paul's warning is clear. If you leave the ship no one will survive. Everyone is needed to direct the ship to safety. The apostle evidently did not think that the promise of everyone's survival precluded the need for warning them what would happen if they jumped ship. It would appear that the warning he issued was one of the means God employed by which he spared and preserved all their lives.

Is the warning emptied of significance simply because the threat of death never came to pass? No. The threat never came to pass because everyone heeded the warning. Some apply this principle to Hebrews 10. The argument is that this sort of warning to those who are saved is not meaningless simply because the threat never comes to pass. ***True Christians escape the threatened judgment precisely by paying heed to the warning and obeying it.***

Third, the most likely interpretation in my opinion is that the word “sanctified” in this passage does not refer to internal moral purification from sin but has in view the notion of being set apart or consecrated. We must remember that words such as this mean different things in different contexts. For example, during the time of the Old Testament the people of Israel could become externally “defiled” and thus unable to participate in the ceremonies of worship. In order to be included with those who worshipped Yahweh, it was necessary that they be “cleansed” with the “blood of goats and bulls.” They needed to be sprinkled “with the ashes of a heifer.” In this way they were “sanctified,” not in the sense that they were internally or spiritually cleansed or forgiven of their sins, but in the sense of being made fit for participation in Israel's ceremonial rituals.

Many of those who were “sanctified” in this sense were unbelievers. They were not born again. We see this in **Hebrews 9:13-14** – “For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, *sanctify* for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.”

In saying these people were “sanctified” he isn’t saying they were saved. He is telling us that they were externally or ceremonially cleansed and thus qualified to join with God’s people in worship. *They were thus “set apart” but not saved.*

We see this same word translated “sanctified” used in **1 Corinthians 7:14** in much the same way: “For the unbelieving husband is made holy [sanctified] because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy [sanctified] because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy [sanctified].” These unbelievers are not “saved” simply because they are married to a Christian. And neither are their children. But they are set apart and come under the umbrella of those blessings, so to speak, that exist wherever a true child of God is found. They are exposed to unique privileges and the consistent proclamation of gospel truth. Living daily in such close union with a believer brings to the unbeliever a knowledge and experience of gospel blessings that other unbelievers do not experience. But they are still unbelievers, as 1 Corinthians 7:16 indicates – “For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?”

A somewhat similar use of the word “sanctified” is found in 1 Timothy 4:5. There Paul says of food and drink that if it is received with thanksgiving “it is made holy [sanctified] by the word of God and prayer.” That is to say, you shouldn’t regard food as defiling and inedible. Rather, it is set apart by God for a good purpose, namely, to be eaten with joy and thanksgiving.

When non-Christians who claim to be Christians join us here at Bridgeway and sing songs of praise and hear the Word of God preached and listen intently as we pray and even partake of the Lord’s Supper (although they shouldn’t), they are made the recipients of a great blessing. It doesn’t mean they are saved. We hope they will respond in faith and receive the forgiveness of sins, but they may not. But in either case they are granted an incredible privilege of joining with Christians in worship and are thus exposed to spiritual blessings that we hope and pray will lead them to trust Christ for salvation. In this sense they are “sanctified.”

So the likelihood is that these are people who have in a sense experienced a religious and outward purification that often happens to those who identify with the visible church. They come under the influence of God’s Word and even grow in their understanding of its truths. They are loved by Christians in the body and are the focus of our service and kindness. They see for themselves the movement of the Spirit, perhaps in healing or in setting people free from demonic oppression. In all this they are in a very real sense, but not in a saving sense, set apart from the world and identified with the people of God.

Someone who has experienced this awesome opportunity and privilege only then to willfully repudiate the person and work of Christ through whom it was made possible can expect only

judgment. Consistent with this, our author then proceeds to distinguish between two groups in Hebrews 10:39. There are, on the one hand, those who do not have saving faith and thus eventually fall away (“shrink back”) into destruction. On the other hand, there are those who have saving faith and thus persevere to the preserving of the soul. He doesn’t envision a third group: those who have saving faith and later fall away. And for this we can only give thanks and praise to the grace of God that preserves his people from falling.

Perhaps it would help to read Hebrews 10 in the light of what we’ve already seen in **Hebrews 3:14**. There we read, “For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.” This means that if someone does not hold their confidence or faith in Christ all the way to the end, if they do *not* persevere, they never came to know Christ in a saving way in the first place. It isn’t that they got saved and then fell away. If they fell away, they were never saved at all. Perseverance in faith is the proof or evidence of sharing in Christ in the salvation he has provided.

So, if Hebrews 10 is talking about someone who professed faith in Jesus and was given the privilege of being set apart with the people of God to worship, only then to abandon their profession, their apostasy proves that they never came to share in Christ in a saving way in the first place.

The Apostle John put it this way in **1 John 2:19** – “They went out from us [that is to say, they apostatized and turned their back on Jesus and repudiated the gospel they once claimed to believe], but they were not of us [again, they never truly shared our spiritual life in Christ]; for if they had been of us [or to use the language of Hebrews 3:14, if they had “come to share in Christ”], they would have continued with us [i.e., they would have persevered and remained true to Jesus]. But they went out [they apostatized], that it might become plain that they all are not of us [their departure or apostasy serves to expose the fact that not everyone who claims to be a Christian actually is a Christian; only those who persevere or hold their confidence firm to the end are the ones who’ve been born again].”

Conclusion

It’s difficult to conclude a message like this the same way I try to conclude most other sermons. I don’t have a list of practical suggestions for you to follow. A passage like Hebrews 10 on the sobering reality of divine judgment doesn’t lend itself to five practical steps to improve your marriage or a sure-fire formula to impress your boss. So I want to draw a few important conclusions that I do pray will challenge your view of God and deepen and expand your gratitude for his grace to you in Christ.

First, the wrath and righteous anger of God is not merely an OT doctrine. People mistakenly think that the so-called “God of the Old Testament” was an angry ogre who bears little resemblance to the God of the NT. But this fails to recognize that the OT is filled with descriptions of God’s compassion and longsuffering and mercy and tender-hearted ways. And the NT is likewise filled with passages like Hebrews 10 which speak unapologetically of divine wrath. And may I remind you of what will happen at the Second Coming of Christ? We read in Revelation 19:15, “From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.”

Second, we need to thank God for his wrath. That’s right. You should thank God and praise him for his wrath. To think that unrepentant and stubbornly defiant rebels might never be called to account for their deeds and never face the judgment they deserve is horrific. I’m grateful to God that, if not in this life then certainly in the next, and for eternity, those who hate him and perpetrate unimaginable wickedness on this earth will be judged.

Third, we must always praise and glorify God for his amazing grace that has made it possible for us to be spared this wrath. His wrath has been poured out on Jesus and altogether satisfied for those who put their trust in him as Lord and Savior. Yes, we are among the perpetrators of evil and abuse and wickedness in the earth, but if you look to God’s mercy for you in the death of Jesus you will find forgiveness. ***God’s wrath wasn’t set aside or ignored when it comes to the sins of Christians. It was fully and finally and forever poured out on his Son who endured for sinners what they otherwise should have suffered.*** And thus we sing:

In Christ alone, who took on flesh, fullness of God in helpless babe!

This gift of love and righteousness, scorned by the ones he came to save.

Till on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied,

For every sin on him was laid, here in the death of Christ, I live!