



***The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.***

*- 1 John 4:8*

## Understanding the **Wrath** of God

One of the greatest detriments to a personal relationship with God is misunderstanding the Biblical references to God's wrath or anger. We start off on the wrong foot when God's anger is compared to human anger. God then comes across as some grumpy old man who gets perturbed and irritated at his lack-luster humanity when they don't perform up to His lofty standards. Jesus is then seen primarily as One who has to protect us from the fiery anger of His Dad. Jesus, "meek and mild", is contrasted with the harsh, judgmental personality of Father God (Watch out for those lightning bolts!). Michelangelo, and other religious painters, have only served to cement the emotional image in our minds: Jesus is a "friend of sinners" but the Father is not user-friendly at all!

This is a "cultural" view of God and an outright lie.

The Biblical view is what we observe in Jesus is exactly what we observe in the Father (John 14: 8-11, Col. 1: 15). So the unconditional, self-sacrificing love we see in Jesus is also a snapshot of the Father as well (John 5: 19). Moreover, John identifies the basic nature of God as love (1 John 4:8). *So then how are we to understand God's seemingly destructive, capricious anger in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament?*

First of all, God is not human but is Spirit (Numbers 23: 19, John 4: 24). So any description on our part will, by its very nature, fall short of capturing the fullness of God. Jews know this as they won't even pronounce God's name, Yahweh, as they see it as presumptuous on our part. Yet it is important to try to understand God's nature, even in limited ways. So the Bible gives us stories and metaphors and symbols to assist us. I'd like to focus on one metaphor for God that may illumine the whole issue of God's anger: fire.

So if the very nature of God is what we call love, let's frame it Biblically as a fiery, passionate love. It's the kind of love described in passages from the Song of Solomon, two lovers head-over-heels in love with one another. It's the kind of love where a lone prophet is told to marry a non-recovered prostitute as a picture of God's love for a broken people. It's the kind of love where God allows his only son to be brutally murdered for the healing of an arrogant and death-loving humanity. This is not sweet, sentimental stuff. This love encompasses explosive power and truth and new life. It is a raging fire that can *destroy* unhelpful stuff in our lives and can *empower* us for the life-giving, creative stuff (Mat. 3: 11-12). And Jesus is the one who *baptizes* (totally immerse) us in this fire. (over)

Now we have a choice.

We can surrender ourselves to this fire. We can be cleansed of the "chaff" in our lives, not just the bad things we do but also the **attitudes** that give birth to the bad actions. These bad attitudes basically come from the belief that I can live my life *autonomously*, that is, without regard to God or the people around me. It is the ego-controlled life. Paul calls it the "flesh". Jesus says it is the part of the seed that must die if the plant is to grow and flourish (John 12: 24-25). So if we say "yes" to the fire of God's love, we are saying "yes" to the burning away of ego-controlled attitudes and actions and "yes" to a new way of living in the power of that love (see a different aspect of that fire in Acts chp. 2). The person who makes this surrender to God's fire experiences joy and purpose and an unfolding eternal life of belonging to God and to others. They exclaim, "God **loves** and embraces me!"

Now, we can also resist God's love-fire. This is the choice that tries to maintain an autonomous lifestyle, one which basically defines itself by the ego alone. Jesus describes this choice as a branch which decides to break away from the rest of the plant. It is no longer connected to the branches or stem or roots. Hence it is no longer connected to life, and it dies. Many people make this choice. They strive and scrape to grasp a little happiness for themselves, only to have it slip through their fingers. Their ego fights against the fire of God. They experience anxiety, hopelessness, confusion, and a tortuously slow death. They say, "God is **angry** at me and cannot be found!"

***Both sets of experiences result from the same love.*** God's love-fire is a constant for all people at all times (Matt. 5: 44-45). It is *our response* to that faithful love that leads to our **experience** of God. So which will you choose?

*Bible passages to ponder: James 1: 19-20, Numbers 23: 19, Psalm 30: 5, Luke 20: 17-18, Psalm 18: 25-26, Matt. 12: 37, Romans 8: 14-15, 31-39; Mark 4: 24-25, John 5:22 and 8: 15, Matt. 7: 1-2, John 8: 10-11, Luke 15: 20, Psalm 73: 26, Psalm 103: 1-13, Psalm 131: 1-3, Romans 6: 23.*

Let us know if we can support you in experiencing God's love, today and for all eternity.



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