

Does God Get Angry?

Tim Crosby

By the time of Christ some philosophers had come to the conclusion that God, in His absolute perfection, is not subject to human passions and emotions. He knows no distress, excitement, love, or anger. Philo, a Hellenistic Jew who lived at the same time as Christ, wrote: "Some . . . assume that the Existent feels wrath and anger, whereas He is not susceptible to any emotion at all. For anxiety is peculiar to human weakness." [1]

We know better, for we know that Jesus experienced very human emotions. And He said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9*). Scripture teaches that God suffers with His children: "In all their distress he too was distressed" (Isa. 63:9). God's tender love exceeds that of the most devoted mother: "'Is not Ephraim-my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him,' declares the Lord" (Jer. 31:20).

However, a strangely seductive variation of the idea that God has no emotion is gaining ground today and is widely accepted among Christians. It is the belief that God does not get angry.

Modern theology tends to emphasize God's love at the expense of His holiness. It overemphasizes the fact that His love is unconditional (ignoring passages such as John 15:10-14: "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love. . . . You are my friends if you do what I command") and tends to depersonalize the concept of retribution. The universe, it is said, is like a live wire that automatically burns those who get into the wrong relationship to it. But, as C. S. Lewis pointed out, those who substitute the picture of a live wire for that of an offended Deity do not realize that they have deprived us of all hope, for an offended Deity can

forgive, but a live wire cannot.

There is, in fact, a great deal of truth in the "live wire" idea. Scripture teaches that evil brings its own reward (Hosea 13:9; Jer. 6:19; Prov. 26:27; 28:6, 10; Ps. 34:21; 37:14, 15). God's punishment of the wicked often consists in abandoning them to their wickedness (Rom. 1:24-28; Ps. 81:12; Acts 7:42) to reap its terrible results. Even when the Bible speaks of God destroying, the destruction often is actually the work of alien armies or evil men (Jer. 33: 4, 5). In 1 Chronicles 10:14 we are told that because of Saul's transgression, the Lord "slew him" (RSV), yet verse 4 says that Saul "took his own sword, and fell upon it" (RSV). The idea of retribution as a natural process might be further supported from those texts that speak of sowing and reaping (Prov. 22:8; Hosea 10:13; Gal. 6:7-9; Job 4:8). But these texts hardly imply that damnation is a natural result of our evil deeds any more than they imply that salvation is a natural result of our good works.

Although God's retribution is often indirect, there is also overwhelming scriptural testimony to God's active, direct vengeance. Those fundamental Old Testament passages that define God's character affirm that He is both extremely kind, loving, and forgiving, and extremely zealous in punishing and avenging (Ex. 20:5; 34:6, 7; Deut. 7:9, 10). The authors of Scripture see no difficulty in this at all, nor do they shrink from presenting God's vengeance as a salient aspect of His character (Deut. 32: 41-43; Ps. 94:1; Isa. 1:24; Eze. 7:8, 9; Micah 5:15; Nahum 1:2ff.)

Ah, but this is the Old Testament! Don't we find a different picture in the New?

No. The same dual emphasis is repeated in the New Testament: God saves and destroys (James 4:12). We are told to consider both "the kindness and the severity of God" (Rom. 11:22, RSV). One of the most intense pictures of God's vengeance is found in Revelation 19:11-21-and this is a portrayal of the Son! The same Testament that says "God is love" also says "God is a consuming fire." He is the avenger (Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30). Even Jesus got angry (Mark 3:5; compare Rev. 6:16). He destroyed the fig tree and threw the robbers out of

the Temple (Mark 11:12-17). Jesus also spoke of the wrath of God (John 3:36); and portrayed God as a king who relentlessly punished and destroyed the impenitent (Matt. 18:34, 35; 22:7; Luke 12:46; 19:27). Thus the divine wrath is as clearly taught in the New Testament as in the Old.

Righteous Indignation

Of course, human anger is all too often fueled by wounded pride; we become petulant and vindictive; we lose control. God's anger is not like this. But there is a righteous indignation that is not only legitimate but essential. Imagine two individuals who observe a group of thugs tormenting a helpless victim. One of the observers shrugs his shoulders and walks away, while the other becomes angry and forcefully intervenes. Which of them is righteous: the calm one or the angry one?

Wrath is the emotion a just man feels when confronted with injustice (see Judges 9:30; 2 Sam. 12:5; Neh. 5:6; Ex. 32:19; Acts 17:16). To love the good is to hate the evil that is antagonistic to it (Heb. 1:9); therefore anger and love are two different sides of the same coin. Perhaps this is why it is John, the apostle of love, who wrote the most graphic portrayal of God's wrath in the New Testament-the book of Revelation.

The antithesis of love is not wrath but apathy. And God is anything but apathetic. The second commandment says that God is a "jealous" God. "Jealous" might also be translated "zealous," or even "impassioned." In other words, God cares-fiercely. Like any good parent, He gets upset when His children go astray. God is not love-dovey, namby-pamby, laidback, harmless, and jovial. If His children are naughty, He disciplines them (Heb. 12:4-11), because He wants only the best for them.

God's hatred of evil is just as strong as His love of good. His holiness is benign toward right and malevolent toward sin, just as a fire may comfort or destroy. His glory is toxic to evil, just as oxygen, which is life-giving to humans, is toxic to certain types of bacteria. God

is matter, and sin is anti-matter, and whenever matter encounters anti-matter there is a holocaust.

In Scripture, the problem that perplexes the righteous is not "How can a merciful God destroy?" but just the opposite: "How can a just God allow evil to go unchecked?" (Ps. 73; 79:10; 94:1-7; Hab. 1, 2; Rev. 6:10). Again, the scriptural testimony is not that God does not get angry, but that He is slow to anger, and does not stay angry (Ps. 30:5; Isa. 54:7, 8; Ps. 78:38;) Isa. 12:1; Hosea 11:9; 14:1; Micah 7:18). The modern embarrassment with God's wrath is unknown to Scripture.

Anthropomorphism?

Some have suggested that statements about God's wrath are just an anthropomorphism, a concession to the times. But there is no reason to assume this, for it is impossible to find even a single text that says that God never kills or gets angry. If allusions to God's wrath are just culture-conditioned figures of speech, then perhaps assertions of His love are equally unreliable.

Some writers would go so far as to maintain that God does not kill; He merely allows Satan to take life whenever it suits His purposes. Nor only is this viewpoint scripturally invalid; it is based on the illogical assumption that Satan is always willing to cooperate with God by destroying his own agents who are hindering God's will! And even if it were true, it would not protect God from responsibility for people's death. Although David did not personally take the life of Uriah, he is still accused of having "struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword" (2 Sam. 12:9). Therefore, it does not help matters to say that God merely "allows" Satan to take life. If God wills for demons rather than angels to destroy, how does that make Him less responsible?

Another argument that those who deny that God kills raise is that what is wrong for us must be wrong for God, too. At first glance this seems reasonable. Surely God practices what

He preaches, doesn't He? If the law is a transcript of His character, does He not keep it?

The analogy of the child-parent relationship is helpful here. Many things that children are forbidden to do ("Don't torment the cat") are just as wrong for the parents. But some things ("Don't touch the car keys"; "Don't stay up past 9:00") are not wrong in themselves; they are forbidden only because the child is incapable of exercising adult responsibility.

The same is true of God and us. God forbids us to do certain things that are perfectly legitimate for Him to do. For example, God demands praise (Jer. 31:7) and accepts worship, but it is wrong for a creature to do these things (Rev. 19:10). God asks us to rest on the Sabbath, but He continues to work on this day (John 5:17)-as do His human agents (Matt. 12:5). God forbids us to take vengeance, but He does so (Rom. 12:19)-as do His human agents, the civil authorities (Rom. 13:1-5). Vengeance in itself is not wrong, but God knows that we cannot be trusted to carry it out fairly in our own case.

But what about the sixth commandment? Set aside for the moment the generally accepted scholarly position that this commandment should be translated "Thou shalt not murder" and does not forbid capital punishment or killing in war. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that it forbids all killing. Even if this were true, would it mean that God Himself has no right to take life? No, because life belongs to Him. I have no right to burn down another man's barn (eighth commandment), but the owner has that right because it belongs to him. Likewise, God may take away the possessions of any of His children for His own reasons-something that would be called stealing if we did it-because all things belong to Him. A parent may teach his child not to steal from others and yet, without being inconsistent, take away from the child a toy that the child is misusing.

God and Genocide

But does that justify what some would call genocide? Let us examine a worst-case example of the problem: the slaughter of Canaanites in the Old Testament. Here generations

of skeptics have found ample ammunition in their case against God. How could God command His people to wipe out entire cities of men, women, and children simply because they happened to hold different beliefs?

Consider the following thought experiment: Suppose that you were out walking one day and heard agonizing screams coming from inside a house across the road. Upon entering, you saw a boy being held down on a table by several teenagers while a muscular man, his back toward you, was sawing through the boy's leg with a carpenter's saw. The boy was screaming in pain. What would you think of this man?

Suppose now that, upon inquiry, you discovered that the man was the boy's father; that he was also a physician; that he had just arrived at his home in this primitive and isolated village to find his son dying of acute septicemia of the leg; that no sedatives were available; and that tears were streaming down the father's face. Now what do you think? A full knowledge of the situation makes quite a difference!

In the case of Numbers 31, I suggest that if we knew all of the facts, that which at first seems a cruelty would be seen as a mercy, as in the case of the amputating physician. Consider the facts we know: If one accepts the premise of a literal hell and the Bible's evaluation of the apparently irremediable wickedness of the Canaanites-and archaeology has confirmed the moral bankruptcy of Canaanite culture-then God's authorization of their total destruction is justifiable, even merciful, in that it entailed the least possible amount of suffering for the smallest number of individuals when seen in the light of eternity. Had the Canaanites been allowed to live, they not only would have continued in sin, resulting in additional suffering in hell someday, but they would have begotten offspring who would have ended up in the same place. In addition, they would have corrupted the Israelites. God told His people to terminate the Canaanites' lives in order to prevent all of this. It was a case of less suffering now or greater suffering later.

Difficult times impose difficult questions upon us. In times of war, to end the conflict

more quickly, even the defenders of liberty, justice, and righteousness have made decisions that brought suffering or death to the innocent. If great leaders and good men sometimes find it necessary to let the righteous die with the guilty for the achievement of a greater good in the end, then has the Creator Himself no right to discriminatingly (see Genesis 18) destroy evil societies?

Hell was originally intended only for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41), but those who have chosen to share Satan's character must share his punishment. It has been suggested that God will leave the wicked to destroy one another, but would a just God leave the weak at the mercy of the strong? How then could the degree of suffering be proportional to the amount of light (Luke 12:46-48)? According to Matthew 10:28, human beings can "kill the body but cannot kill the soul"; only God can "destroy both soul and body in hell." Hell is a supernatural extinction of existence; it is God's retributive wrath against sin.

The doctrine of hell can be understood only as a manifestation of God's retributive justice, in which the sinner is punished until he receives the exact amount of pain he deserves in the light of his crimes. Jesus warned those who failed to make things right with the judge that they would never get out of prison till they had "paid the last penny" (Matt 5:26, RSV). The unforgiving servant was delivered to the tortures, "till he should pay all his debt" (Matt. 18:34, RSV). The severity of the punishment depends on the amount of light a person has had (Luke 12:47, 48).

Reform or Punishment?

But the concept of equivalent punishment, or retributive justice, is currently under heavy attack. Why punish men in hell when there is no hope of reform? After all, giving the criminal his deserts will not undo the crime he has committed. Is not the only legitimate reason for punishment to deter or to reform?

Let us see what happens when we replace the "primitive" concept of imposing

punishment to match the crime with a more "humanitarian" concept of evil as a sickness that needs to be "treated" until the patient is reformed. Under the humanitarian system, punishment would no longer be based on what is deserved. It would not be measured (an limited) by any "barbaric" rule like "an eye for an eye," but would be administered only as long as it served to reform, or to deter others-as is done in some nations where dissenters are shut up in psychological wards until they are "cured."

Uh-oh! Already our new theory of justice is headed for trouble. "That's unfair," you say. Not under the humanitarian system it isn't, for the offender is not really being punished at all; rather he is simply being "reformed, rehabilitated, educated." Such a system no longer deals with categories of justice and injustice, of deserts and merits, but of sickness and cure. Surely rehabilitation is not unjust! Under the new theory the offender is not punished until the punishment is commensurate with the crime, but is treated until he is cured-which could last forever.

C. S. Lewis provides a trenchant analysis of the ultimate results of rejecting the concept of retributive justice: "According to the humanitarian theory, to punish a man because he deserves it, and as much as he deserves, is mere revenge, and, therefore, barbarous and immoral. It is maintained that the only legitimate motives for punishing are the desire to deter others by example or to mend the criminal. . . .

"My contention is that this doctrine, merciful though it appears, really means that each one of us, from the moment he breaks the law, is deprived of the rights of a human being. The reason is this. The humanitarian theory removes from punishment the concept of desert. But the concept of desert is the only connecting link between punishment and justice. It is only as deserved or undeserved that a sentence can be just or unjust. I do not here contend that the question 'Is it deserved?' is the only one we can reasonably ask about a punishment. We may very properly ask whether it is likely to deter others and to reform the criminal. But neither of these two last questions is a question about justice. . . . Thus when we cease to consider what

the criminal deserves and consider only what will cure him or deter others, we have tacitly removed him from the sphere of justice altogether. . . .

"Only the expert 'penologist' (let barbarous things have barbarous names), in the light of previous experiment, can tell us what is likely to deter; only the psychotherapist can tell us what is likely to cure. It will be in vain for the rest of us, speaking simply as men, to say, 'but this punishment is hideously unjust, hideously disproportionate to the criminal's deserts.' The experts with perfect with perfect logic will reply, 'but nobody was talking about deserts. No one was talking about *punishment* in your archaic, vindictive sense of the word. Here are the statistics proving that this treatment deters. Here are the statistics proving that this other treatment cures. What is your trouble?'"[2]

What Punishment?

Why do sinners deserve punishment? For the same reason that God deserves praise. We should not praise God with a view of receiving some favor, but because He is what He is. The purpose is not to change God; the praise is not offered as a cause to achieve some result; it is simply due. Likewise, Adolf Hitler, for example, deserves to suffer for the suffering he has caused others, not to change him, or to achieve any result, but simply because it is due. It is justice. If, in addition, his suffering has a deterrent effect, or if it cures him, all the better. But retribution is required apart from any deterrent or curative effect it may have. It is the moral analogy to the physical law "for every action there is an equal an opposite reaction." Anyone who works deserves to receive the wages that he has earned, and the wages of sin is death.

Furthermore, the punishment must match the crime. This is the principle behind the law of *lex talionis*, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." I would argue that this principle is the very essence-in fact, the definition-of justice. Unfortunately, a misinterpretation of the Sermon on the Mount has led some to regard this principle as an abandoned relic of a primitive mentality.

Most scholars (e.g., Joachim Jeremias, David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Arthur W. Pink) agree that Christ, in Matthew 5:38-48, is not setting aside the law of *lex talionis* as a judicial principle, but as a principle of personal vengeance. It is wrong for the individual to take the law into his own hands. Vengeance belongs to God (Heb. 10:30) and to His delegated agents. Although Jesus warned His audience on the mount to "resist not evil" (Matt. 5:39, KJV), yet in Romans 13:4 the governing authority in the land is said to be a "minister of God, and avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil" (NASB). Civil authorities have the right to avenge. But Jesus' audience on the mount had not such authority. The Old Testament law of *lex talionis* was given as part of the laws of the government of the nation of Israel; but the Sermon on the Mount is given to the Jews who have lost their sovereignty to the Romans.

Therefore, "an eye for an eye" is still a valid principle of jurisprudence. Indeed, the *lex talionis* principle-punishment commensurate with the crime-is actually reaffirmed in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:1, 2; "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

The rest of the New Testament also indicates that God acts in accordance with the principle of *lex talionis*. "God is just," writes Paul. "He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you" (2 Tess. 1:6). Note that this "tit for tat" response is considered to be proof of God's justice. Hebrews 2:2, 3 makes the new dispensation an intensification of the old, where "every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution" (RSV). Colossians 3:25 and Romans 2:5-11 speak of payment in kind for one's deeds. The parable of the unmerciful servant concludes with a retributive judgment that requires an amount of suffering equivalent to the crimes committed: "So angry was the master that he condemned the man to torture until he should pay the debt in full. And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you, unless you each forgive your brother from your hearts" (Matt. 18:34, 35, NEB).

Particularly revealing are the Apocalypse's indications of the behind-the-scenes reactions to God's judgments. The plea for blood vengeance on the part of the righteous dead in Revelation 6:9-11 is eventually answered in Revelation 19:2, where God avenges on Babylon "the blood of his servants." After the first three angels have poured out their "bowls of God's wrath" upon the earth (Rev. 16:1-4), the angels praise God for His justice in requiting the wicked blood for blood (verses 5-7), exclaiming "They deserve it" (NASB). Note that this punishment is purely retributive, not corrective, for at this point in history the wicked are beyond repentance (verses 9, 11); probation has closed. It is clear that God works on the principle of "an eye for an eye" and that the angels find this praiseworthy.

One last point. The "no-wrath" position-robs even the biblical statements about God's love and mercy of all force, for without wrath, there is no mercy. When a parent serves a child a meal, this is not a mercy, but a duty. But if the child disobeys, and for punishment is sent to his room without supper, and then the parent relents and serves him a meal in his room, this is mercy, because only wrath is to be expected. Thus unless we take seriously the scriptural testimony about God's wrath, we can discover no need for His mercy.

It is easy to slip from the truth of "God is love" into its counterfeit: "God is nice." It seems much safer to serve a tame God, always gentle, ever the lamb, never the lion. But as long as the Bible remains our creed, this caricature of God must be rejected.

[1]. *Quod Deus Sit Immutabilis* 52.

[2]. C. S. Lewis, "The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 287-289.