

The Love & Wrath of God

David Flatt

How can a loving God exact wrath upon the disobedient? This is an age-old question which many have found deeply perplexing. If God is loving, forgiving, and merciful, how can he exact wrath upon the disobedient? Shouldn't God grant mercy to the disobedient despite their disobedience?

The Bible declares that both love and wrath comprise the nature of God. Jesus told Nicodemus, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (John 3:16-18).

In this conversation, Jesus brought together the love and wrath of God. God sent Jesus to die in our place as an atonement for sin: the doctrine of "substitutionary atonement." If we obey Jesus by faith, we can be saved from the wrath of God. If we do not believe, we presently stand condemned, doomed to incur the wrath of God. Paul warned that the wrath of God is coming to the sons of disobedience (Eph. 5:6). Therefore, we must put to death sin in our lives (Col. 3:5-6).

Yet, many continue to protest the wrath of God. "Jesus died; therefore, I am saved. God will accept me as I am. God is love!" Paul warned the Ephesians about this kind of deceptive thinking (Eph. 5:6). To better understand why God will exact wrath upon the disobedient, consider the Old Testament account of David and Absalom.

A Fickle King and a Defiant Son

Second Samuel chapters thirteen through nineteen document tragic events in the life of King David and his family. One of David's sons, Amnon, raped his sister, Tamar. When this horrific deed was told to David, he did nothing about it. David was angry but he did not punish Amnon. Justice was not done. This enraged David's other son: Absalom.

Over two years, the anger of Absalom intensified. Finally, he plotted to kill Amnon. At a sheep-shearing festival, Absalom gave orders for Amnon to be killed. One of David's self-serving advisers, Jonadab, told David that Absalom had Amnon killed in response to Amnon's assault of Tamar. Jonadab knew this because he had devised the plan for Amnon to rape Tamar! However, Absalom's actions were not justified. He had committed murder and he knew it. Absalom fled the country.

Absalom lived in exile for three years. Over time, David's heart softened towards Absalom. He had lost one son. He did not want to lose another. Simultaneously, the captain of

David's army, Joab, was working to bring Absalom back into the good graces of David. Recognizing David's vulnerability, Joab schemed with a woman from Tekoa (2 Sam. 14).

The woman from Tekoa presented herself before King David. She told him a story about her two sons. They were arguing in the field one day and one son killed the other. The clansmen demanded the murdering son be executed. This woman, however, begged King David to give his word that her murdering son would be saved. She had already lost one son. Executing her other son would not bring back her dead son. Why should she have to lose both sons?

The woman told David, "We must all die; we are like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again. But God will not take away life, and he devises means so that the banished one will not remain an outcast" (2 Sam. 14:14). In other words, she said there was no use crying over spilled milk. Her son's murder should be overlooked. Then, she expressed a truth wrapped in a lie. God has devised a way for the banished not to remain outcast; however, the history of God's dealings with Israel was filled with examples of Him taking away life as punishment for sin.

As the woman continued to speak, David realized something was not right. After further questioning, the woman confessed that Joab had sent her to David. This story was not about the woman's two sons. This story was about David's two sons. After being made a fool, David agreed to allow Absalom to return to Israel.

The condition of Absalom's return stipulated that he could not see the King. Absalom consented to this arrangement for two years; however, he became defiant. He went to Joab and demanded an audience with the king. Joab made the arrangement. Without the slightest bit of contrition for his crimes, David welcomed Absalom with a kiss (2 Sam. 14:33).

After being welcomed back to the kingdom, Absalom shrewdly gained popularity in Israel. He stole the hearts of the people (2 Sam. 15:6). After four years of gaining support, Absalom drove David off his throne. He led an insurrection against his father. However, the rebellion was short-lived. Absalom was killed.

Upon hearing the news of Absalom's death, David wept bitterly over his son. David's soldiers began to return home, but David was nowhere to be found. He should have been welcoming the soldiers home and thanking them for saving him and his kingdom. Joab found David mourning. Joab rebuked David and demanded that he go and express his gratitude to the soldiers (2 Sam. 19:1-8).

Conclusion

These events can teach us important lessons about the love and wrath of God. First of all, God does not take sin lightly. A person being harmed or killed is not like water being spilled on the ground! Sin demands a response. Second, God exacts wrath because He loves His children. When harm is committed against His children, He holds the criminal/offender

accountable. Third, turning a blind eye to sin produces chaos. David's inaction over the rape of Tamar led to the murder of Amnon, insurrection, and the death of Absalom.

God loves the human family. He loved us to the point of sending His Son to die for our sins that we might be saved from His wrath. God's love demands wrath against those who defy Him and harm His children. Without wrath being dispensed upon the disobedient, human life is no more valuable than water spilled on the ground. Without wrath being dispensed upon the disobedient, God can be pushed off His throne. Without wrath being dispensed upon the disobedient, God is not love.

What kind of a god do we want? One like David? One who was unloving at times? One who was unjust? One who bows to the defiant? Or, do we want a God who is loving, just, and fair? One who protects His children? One who punishes His enemies? If we want the One who is loving, just, and fair, the One who protects His children, and the One who punishes His enemies, we need to look no further than Jesus.