



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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On Grace ... And Wrath

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But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.¹

In which testament and book does the text cited above appear? I suspect many would say the Old, thinking it is perhaps one of the passages where God told Israel to destroy a wicked enemy. Others may look for it in one of the prophets' warnings about the consequences coming to the Israelites because they had embraced idolatry and its associated practices. But in fact, it's from the same New Testament writing as these statements:

And all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.²

That writing, of course, is Romans, the letter we could subtitle "the gospel according to Paul." And no matter how out of step it is with the sensibilities of today's pluralistic ideas, or the false distinction many make between the different depictions of God alleged to characterize the respective testaments, the emphasis on the wrath of God we read in Romans 2.5, 8, the passage cited at the top of this article, is as much a part of Paul's understanding and presentation of the good news as grace, faith, and love.

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the NIV.

² In order, including the quotation under the title, the statements are from Romans 2.5, 8; 3.24; 5.1-2; 6.23; 11.6.

In fact, the word “wrath” (*orgē*; ὀργή) appears twelve times in Romans, one-third of all its appearances in the New Testament as a whole. Paul says wrath is what those who are impenitent and do not obey God should expect (2.5, 8). He says the Mosaic law “brings wrath,” there being no transgression where there is no law (4.15). He stresses that God is in no way unrighteous in bringing his wrath on us when we do not obey his will (3.5; 9.22). Anticipating the day God’s righteous judgment will be revealed, he says that wrath is reserved for those who do not do God’s will (2.5; 12.19). And, yes, he declares that wrath is at times administered in the present age (1.18; 13.4-5).

Paul could not have presented the gospel correctly and said anything else. To acknowledge this is not to endorse the teaching of those who have presented God’s wrath in extreme language that presents him as more angry than merciful. But the right way to correct that error is not to ignore the Bible’s teaching about his wrath, but to emphasize that

Grace is so wonderful and so unexpected exactly because we deserve punishment. If there were no wrath, there would be no grace. Consequently, the wonder of grace is directly related to the reality of wrath. As Berkouwer has perceptibly noted, “only when we acknowledge the complete *reasonableness of his wrath* do we see the Gospel as a *total surprise*.” Grace, then, is unexpected because it is “favor bestowed when wrath is owed.”³

How do we inspire one another to greater appreciation of God’s grace? What can we do to emphasize to unbelievers that the gospel really is good news?

The answers to those questions have multiple components. But, following Paul’s example, those answers should at times include announcements of what the Bible says about God’s holiness, sin’s nature, and yes, God’s wrath. “The person who sins shall die” (Ezek 18.20; cf. Gen 2.17; Rom 6.23) and will “reap whatever [he] sow[s]” (Gal 6.7; cf. Rom 1.18ff.). “But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger” (Rom 2.8).

And, by all means, let’s also declare that praise God, the reality about wrath, sin, and holiness is not the whole story. Sin need not be eternally fatal. To emphasize that truth, we must also share the teaching of the one text in Romans featuring the word *wrath* that we’ve not yet cited:

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, *how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!* (Rom 5.8-9).

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³ John Mark Hicks, *Yet Will I Trust Him: Understanding God in a Suffering World* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1999), 126-127; citing G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin*, Studies in Dogmatics, trans. Philip C. Holtrop (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 371; and Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About God the Redeemer* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1987), 375.