

GOD'S LOVE AND GOD'S WRATH*

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Many think it is easy for God to forgive. I recall meeting a young and articulate French West African when I was studying in Germany more than twenty years ago. We were both working diligently to improve our German, but once a week or so we had had enough, so we went out for a meal together and retreated to French, a language we both knew well. In the course of those meals we got to know each other. I learned that his wife was in London, training to be a medical doctor. He himself was an engineer who needed fluency in German in order to pursue doctoral studies in engineering in Germany.

I soon discovered that once or twice a week he disappeared into the red-light district of town. Obviously he went to pay his money and have his woman. Eventually I got to know him well enough that I asked him what he would do if he discovered that his wife was doing something similar in London.

“Oh,” he said, “I’d kill her.”

“That’s a bit of a double standard, isn’t it?” I asked.

“You don’t understand. Where I come from in Africa, the husband has the right to sleep with many women, but if a wife is unfaithful to her husband she must be killed.”

“But you told me that you were raised in a mission school. You know that the God of the Bible does not have double standards like that.”

He gave me a bright smile, and replied, “Ah, le bon Dieu, il doit nous pardonner; c’est son métier [Ah, God is good, He’s bound to forgive us; that’s His job].”

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It is a common view, is it not? I do not know if my African friend knew that the same words are ascribed to Catherine the Great; he may have been consciously quoting her, for he was well read. But even when people do not put things quite so bluntly, the idea is popular, not least because some ill-defined notions of the love of God run abroad in the land. But they have been sadly sentimentalized and horribly stripped of all the complementary things the Bible has to say.

This address reflects on a few of these other things, with the aim of thinking more precisely and faithfully about the love of God.

THE LOVE OF GOD AND THE WRATH OF GOD

The Bible speaks of the wrath of God in high-intensity language. "The LORD Almighty is mustering an army for war. . . . Wail, for the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty. . . . See, the day of the LORD is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it" (Isa. 13:4, 6, 9).¹ Even allowing for the unusual nature of language in the apocalyptic genre, Revelation 14 includes some of the most violent expressions of God's wrath found in all literature.

Wrath, like love, includes emotion as a necessary component. Here again, if impassibility is defined in terms of the complete absence of all "passions," not only will you fly in the face of biblical evidence, but you will tumble into fresh errors that touch the very holiness of God. The reason is that in itself, wrath, unlike love, is not one of the intrinsic perfections of God. Rather, it is a function of God's holiness against sin. Where there is no sin, there is no wrath, but there will always be love in God. Where God in His holiness confronts His image-bearers in their rebellion, there must be wrath. Otherwise God is not the jealous God He claims to be, and His holiness is impugned. The price of diluting God's wrath is diminishing God's holiness.

While the wrath of God is a function of God's holiness against sin, it nevertheless has a powerful affective element. To distance God too greatly from wrath on the ground of a misconceived form of impassibility soon casts shadows back onto His holiness. Alternatively this so-called "wrath," depersonalized and de-emotionalized, is redefined as an anthropopathism that is actually talking about the impartial and inevitable effects

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version unless noted otherwise

of sin in a person or culture. That was the view of C. H. Dodd in the 1930s. The entailment, then as now, is that the significance of the Cross changes. If God is not really angry, it is difficult to see the need for propitiation.

Further, to retreat to the distinction between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity in this case would be disastrous. That tactic argues that God as He is in Himself (the immanent Trinity) is immune from wrath, while God as He interacts with rebels (the economic Trinity) displays His wrath. But this leaves us in the dubious position of ascribing to God as He is in Himself less concern for maintaining His holiness than God as He interacts with the created and fallen order. Conceptually this is a substantial distance from the picture of God in Scripture; analytically it is slightly bizarre.

How, then, do God's love and His wrath relate to each other? One evangelical cliché has it that God hates the sin but loves the sinner. There is a small element of truth in these words: God has nothing but hate for the sin, but this cannot be said with respect to how God sees the sinner. Nevertheless the cliché is false on the face of it, and should be abandoned. Fourteen times in the first fifty psalms alone, the psalmists state that God hates the sinner, that His wrath is on the liar, and so forth. In the Bible the wrath of God rests on both the sin (Rom. 1:18–23) and the sinner (1:24–32; 2:5; John 3:36).

Our problem in part is that in human experience wrath and love normally abide in mutually exclusive compartments. Love drives wrath out, or wrath drives love out. We come closest to bringing them together, perhaps, in our responses to a wayward act by one of our children, but normally we do not think that a wrathful person is loving.

But this is not the way it is with God. God's wrath is not an implacable blind rage. However emotional it may be, it is an entirely reasonable and willed response to offenses against His holiness. At the same time His love wells up amidst His perfections and is not generated by the loveliness of the loved. Thus there is nothing intrinsically impossible about wrath and love being directed toward the same individual or people at once. God in His perfections must be wrathful against His rebel image-bearers, for they have offended Him; God in His perfections must be loving toward His rebel image-bearers, for He is that kind of God.

Two other misconceptions circulate widely even in circles of confessional Christianity. The first is that in the Old Testament God's wrath is more strikingly transparent than His love, while in the New Testament, though doubtless a residue of wrath remains, a gentleness takes over and softens the darker period:

God's love is now richer than His wrath. After all, Jesus taught His disciples to love their enemies and turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:39, 41).

Nothing could be further from the truth than this reading of the relationship between the Testaments. One suspects that the reason this formula has any credibility at all is that the manifestation of God's wrath in the Old Testament is primarily in temporal categories: famine, plague, siege, war, slaughter. In the here and now those images have a greater impact than what the New Testament says, with its focus on wrath in the afterlife. Jesus, after all, is the One who in the New Testament speaks most frequently and most colorfully about hell, this Jesus of the other cheek. The apostolic writings offer little support for the view that a kinder, gentler God surfaces in the New Testament at this stage in redemptive history.

The reality is that the Old Testament displays the grace and love of God in experience and types, and these realities become all the clearer in the New Testament. Similarly, the Old Testament displays the righteous wrath of God in experience and types, and these realities become all the clearer in the New Testament. In other words both God's love and God's wrath are ratcheted up in the move from the Old Testament to the New. These themes barrel along through redemptive history, unresolved, until they come to a resounding climax in the Cross. Do you wish to see God's love? Look at the Cross. Do you wish to see God's wrath? Look at the Cross.

Hymn writers have sometimes captured this best. In Wales, Christians sing a nineteenth-century hymn by William Rees:

Here is love, vast as the ocean,
 Lovingkindness as the flood,
 When the Prince of life, our ransom,
 Shed for us His precious blood.
 Who His love will not remember?
 Who can cease to sing His praise?
 He can never be forgotten
 Throughout heaven's eternal days.

On the Mount of Crucifixion
 Fountains opened deep and wide;
 Through the floodgates of God's mercy
 Flowed a vast and gracious tide.
 Grace and love, like mighty rivers,
 Poured incessant from above,
 And heaven's peace and perfect justice
 Kissed a guilty world in love.

A second common misconception pictures God as implacably opposed to us and full of wrath but somehow mollified by Jesus, who loves us. Again, there is some wonderful truth here. The Epistle to the Hebrews certainly lends some support to this way of thinking, especially in its portrayal of Jesus as the High Priest, who continuously makes intercession to God for us (Heb. 7:25). All this is modeled on the Levitical worship established at Sinai. Or more precisely the system established at Sinai was meant to be, according to Hebrews, the shadow of the ultimate reality. Jesus is the Advocate who speaks to the Father in the believers' defense (1 John 2:1).

But other strands of New Testament theology must be brought to bear on this subject. God loved the world so much that He gave His Son (John 3:16). This does not mean that God was reluctant while His Son won Him over; rather, God Himself willingly sent His Son. Even though Jesus as the believers' great High Priest intercedes for us and pleads His own blood on our behalf, this is not an independent action the Father somehow did not know about, or reluctantly approved, being eventually won over by the independently originating sacrifice of His Son. Rather, Father and Son are one in this project of redemption. The Son Himself came into the world by the express command of the Father.

Thus propitiation does not mean the Son, full of love, offered Himself and thereby placated (i.e., rendered propitious) the Father, who was full of wrath. The picture is more complex. The Father, full of righteous wrath against sin and sinners, nevertheless loved us so much that He sent His Son. Perfectly mirroring His Father's words and deeds, the Son stood over against us in wrath (displayed vividly when sinners will call for rocks to fall and hide them "from the wrath of the Lamb," Rev. 6:16), and yet He was obedient to His Father's commission, offering Himself on the cross. He did this out of love both for His Father, whom He obeys, and for us, whom He redeems. Thus God is necessarily both the subject and the object of propitiation. He provides the propitiating sacrifice (He is the subject), and He Himself is propitiated (He is the object). That is the glory of the Cross.

All this is implicit in Romans 3:21–26, a great atonement passage. After devoting two and a half chapters to showing how the entire human race is cursed and is rightly under the wrath of God because of its sin (1:18–3:20), the apostle Paul demonstrates how Christ's death was God's wise plan "to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus" (3:26). God presented Jesus as a propitiation in His blood, received through faith (3:25).

THE LOVE OF GOD AND THE INTENT OF THE ATONEMENT

How does the love of God shed light on the purpose of the Atonement, another area related to the sovereignty of God?

The label “limited Atonement” is singularly unfortunate for two reasons. First, it is a defensive, restrictive, expression: Here is Atonement, and then someone wants to limit it. The notion of limiting something as glorious as the Atonement is intrinsically offensive. Second, even when inspected more coolly, “limited Atonement” is objectively misleading. Every view of the Atonement “limits” it in some way, except for the view of the unqualified universalist. For example Arminians limit the Atonement by regarding it as merely potential for everyone. Calvinists regard the Atonement as definite and effective, that is, those for whom Christ died will certainly be saved, but they limit this effectiveness to the elect. Amyraldians limit the Atonement in much the same way as Arminians, even though the undergirding structures are different. It may be less prejudicial therefore to distinguish general Atonement and definite Atonement, rather than unlimited Atonement and limited Atonement. Arminians (and Amyraldians, who may be lumped together for the sake of this discussion) hold that the Atonement is general, that is, sufficient for all, available to all, on condition of faith. Calvinists hold that the Atonement is definite, that is, intended by God to be effective for the elect.

At least part of the argument in favor of definite Atonement runs as follows. Let us grant, for the sake of argument, the truth of election.² That is one point where this discussion intersects with what was stated about God’s sovereignty and electing love in the third lecture in this series. Election granted, the question may be framed in this way: When God sent His Son to die, did He think of the effect of the Cross with respect to His elect differently from the way He thought of the effect of the Cross with respect to all others? If one answers negatively, it is difficult to see that one is really holding to a doctrine of election at all; if one answers positively, then one has veered toward some notion of definite Atonement. The definiteness of the Atonement turns rather more on God’s intent in Christ’s work on the cross than on the mere extent of its significance.

Those who defend definite Atonement cite several verses for support. Jesus will save His people (not everyone) from their sins (Matt. 1:21). Christ gave Himself “for us,” that is, for the people of

² If someone denies unconditional election, as an informed Arminian (but not an Amyraldian) would, most Calvinists would want to start further back.

the New Covenant “to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:14). Moreover, in His death Christ did not merely make adequate provision for the elect; He actually achieved the desired result (Rom. 5:6–10; Eph. 2:15–16). The Son of Man came to give His life a ransom “for many” (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45; cf. Isa. 53:10–12). Christ “loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25).

Others, however, respond that there are simply too many texts on the other side of the issue. “God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son” (John 3:16). Clever exegetical devices that make “the world” a label referring to the elect are not very convincing. Christ Jesus is the propitiation “for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

The arguments marshaled on both sides are of course more numerous and more sophisticated than indicated in this thumbnail sketch. But recall for a moment the outline given in the first address on the various ways the Bible speaks about the love of God: (1) God's intra-Trinitarian love, (2) God's love displayed in His providential care, (3) God's yearning warning and invitation to all human beings as He invites and commands them to repent and believe, (4) God's special love toward the elect, and (5) God's conditional love toward His covenant people as He speaks in the language of discipline. If any one of these is absolutized, a false system is generated that squeezes out other important things the Bible says, thus distorting one's vision of God.

In this case, if we adopt the fourth of these ways of talking about God's love (viz., God's peculiar and effective love toward the elect) and insist that this is the only way the Bible speaks of the love of God, then definite Atonement is exonerated. But this is at the cost of other verses that do not easily fit into this mold, and it is at the expense of being unable to say that there is any sense in which God displays a loving, yearning, salvific stance toward the whole world. Further, there could then be no sense in which the Atonement is sufficient for all without exception. Alternatively, if we put all our theological eggs into the third basket and think of God's love exclusively in terms of open invitation to all human beings, we have excluded not only definite Atonement as a theological construct but also a string of passages which, when read most naturally, mean that Jesus Christ did die, in some special way, for His own people, and that God, with perfect knowledge of the elect, saw Christ's death with respect to the elect differently from the way He saw Christ's death with respect to everyone else.

Surely it is best not to introduce disjunctions where God Him-

self has not introduced them. If one holds that the Atonement is sufficient for all and effective for the elect, then both sets of texts and concerns are accommodated. A verse such as 1 John 2:2 states something about the potential breadth of the Atonement. The proto-Gnostic opponents John was facing thought of themselves as an elite group who enjoyed an inside track with God because of the special insights they had received.³ But when Jesus Christ died, John rejoins, it was not for the sake of, say, the Jews only, or now of some group, Gnostic or otherwise, that sets itself up as the elite of the elect. Far from it, John says: It was not for our sins only, but also for the sins of the whole world. The context then understands this to mean something like “potentially for all without distinction” rather than “effectively for all without exception”—for the latter would mean that all without exception must surely be saved, and John did not teach that that would take place. This is in line, then, with passages that speak of God’s love in the third sense listed above. But it is difficult to see why that should rule out the fourth sense in other passages.

In recent years I have tried to read both primary and secondary sources on the doctrine of the Atonement from Calvin on.⁴ One of my most forceful impressions is that the categories of the debate gradually shift with time so as to force disjunction where a slightly different bit of question-framing would allow synthesis. Correcting this, I suggest, is one of the useful things we may accomplish from an adequate study of the love of God presented in Scripture. For God is a person. Surely it is not surprising that the love that characterizes Him as a person is manifest in a variety of ways toward other persons. But it is always love. Both Arminians and Calvinists should rightly affirm that Christ died for all, in the sense that Christ’s death was sufficient for all and that Scripture portrays God as inviting, commanding, and desiring the salvation of all, out of love (in the third sense developed in the first lecture). Further, all Christians ought also to confess that in a slightly different sense Christ Jesus, in the intent of God, died effectively for the elect alone, in line with the way the Bible speaks of God’s special selecting love for the elect (in the fourth sense developed in the first lecture).

³ At some length I have defended this as the background of 1 John 2:2 in my commentary on 1 John in the *New International Greek Testament Commentary* series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

⁴ One of the latest treatments is G. Michael Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement: A Dilemma for Reformed Theology from Calvin to the Consensus (1536–1675)*, Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1997).

Pastorally, there are many important implications. I mention only one. This approach, I contend, must surely come as a relief to young preachers in the Reformed tradition who hunger to preach the gospel effectively but who do not know how far they can go in saying to unbelievers things like "God loves you." When I have preached or lectured in Reformed circles, I have often been asked the question, "Do you feel free to tell unbelievers that God loves them?" Historically, Reformed theology at its best has never been slow in evangelism, as seen, for instance, in George Whitefield or virtually all the main lights in the Southern Baptist Convention until the end of the last century. Obviously I have no hesitation in answering this question from Reformed preachers affirmatively: of course, I tell the unconverted God loves them.

Not for a moment am I suggesting that when one preaches evangelistically one ought to retreat to passages of the third type (above), holding back on the fourth type until after a person is converted. There is something sleazy about that sort of approach. Certainly it is possible to preach evangelistically when dealing with a passage that explicitly teaches election. Charles Spurgeon did this sort of thing regularly. But I am saying that, provided there is an honest commitment to preaching the whole counsel of God, preachers in the Reformed tradition should not hesitate for an instant to declare the love of God for a lost world, for lost individuals. The Bible's ways of speaking about the love of God are comprehensive enough not only to permit this, but to mandate it.⁵

THE LOVE OF GOD FOR THE WORLD

One of the striking formal dissonances in the Johannine corpus is the clash between the Gospel's assertion of the love of God for the world (John 3:16) and the first epistle's prohibition of love for the world (1 John 2:15–17). In brief, God loves the world, and Christians had better not. The impression is rather strong that if people love the world, they remain under God's wrath: the love of the Father is not in them. The dissonance, of course, is merely formal. There is a ready explanation. But this formal dissonance reminds us yet again that the ways the Bible speaks of something are diverse and contextually controlled.

God's love for the world is commendable because it manifests itself in awesome self-sacrifice; our love for the world is repulsive when it lusts for evil participation. God's love for the world is praiseworthy because it brings the transforming gospel to it; our

⁵ Somewhat similar reflections are given by Hywel R. Jones, "Is God Love?" *Banner of Truth Magazine*, January 1998, 10–16.

love for the world is ugly because we seek to be conformed to the world. God's love for the world issues in certain individuals being called out from the world and into the fellowship of Christ's followers; our love for the world is sickening where we wish to be absorbed into the world.

So "do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father [whether this love is understood in the subjective or the objective sense] is not in him" (1 John 2:15). But clearly believers are to love the world in the sense that we are to go into every part of it and bring the glorious gospel to every creature. In this sense we imitate in small ways the wholly praiseworthy love of God for the world.

THE LOVE OF GOD AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD

I conclude with three reflections.

First, the love of God for His people is sometimes likened to the love of a parent for the child (e.g., Heb. 12:4–11; cf. Prov. 14:26). The Lord disciplines those He loves (the fifth category of God's love). These lectures have addressed that category less than the other four. But believers must never forget to keep themselves in the love of God (Jude 21), remembering that He is loving and merciful to those who love Him and who keep His commandments (Exod. 20:6). In this way we imitate Jesus. As Jesus obeys His heavenly Father and remains in His love, so we are to obey Jesus and to remain in His love (John 15:9–11).

Second, the love of God is not merely to be analyzed, understood, and adopted into wholistic categories of integrated theological thought. It is to be received, absorbed, felt. Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14–21 connects such Christian experience of the love of God with Christian maturity, with being "filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (v. 19). Clearly no one can be a mature Christian who does not walk in this path.⁶

Third, Christians should never underestimate the power of the love of God to break down and transform the most amazingly hard individuals. One of the most powerful recent affirmations of this truth in a context far removed from our church buildings is the worldwide showings of the musical version of Victor Hugo's magnificent novel *Les Misérables*. Sentenced to a nineteen-year term of hard labor for stealing bread, Jean Valjean becomes hard and bitter. No one can break him; everyone fears him. Released from prison, Valjean finds it difficult to survive, as innkeepers

⁶ I have dealt with this subject at much greater length in *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992)

will not welcome him and work is scarce. Then a kind bishop welcomes him into his home. But Valjean betrays the trust. During the night he creeps off into the darkness, stealing some of the family silver.

Valjean is brought back next morning to the bishop's door by three policemen. They had arrested him and found the stolen silver on him. A word from the bishop and the wretch would be incarcerated for life. But the bishop instantly exclaims, "So here you are! I'm delighted to see you. Had you forgotten that I gave you the candlesticks as well? They're silver like the rest, and worth a good two hundred francs. Did you forget to take them?"

Jean Valjean is released, and he is transformed. When the gendarmes withdraw, the bishop insists on giving the candlesticks to his speechless, mortified, thankful guest. "Do not forget, do not ever forget, that you have promised me to use the money to make yourself an honest man," admonishes the bishop. And meanwhile Javert, the detective who is constantly pursuing Valjean and who is consumed by justice but who knows nothing of forgiveness or compassion, crumbles when his black-and-white categories of mere justice fail to cope with grace that goes against every instinct for revenge. Valjean is transformed; Javert jumps off a bridge and drowns in the Seine.

Of course this is Christian love, that is, the love of God, mediated in this case through a bishop. This is how it should be, for God's love so transforms us, that we mediate it to others, who are thereby transformed. We love because He first loved us; we forgive because we stand forgiven.

One of the faces of love I have virtually ignored in this series is our love. My focus has been on the love of God and the various ways the Bible speaks of that love. Yet sooner or later one cannot adequately grasp the love of God in Scripture without reflecting on the ways in which God's love elicits our love. The five categories developed in the first lecture also relate to believers' love.

(1) God's intra-Trinitarian love ensures the plan of redemption. The Father so loves the Son that He has decreed that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father, and to that end He "shows" the Son things, gives Him tasks, including the supreme task of the Cross. And the Son so loves the Father that out of obedience He went to the cross on our behalf, the Just for the unjust. The entire plan of redemption that has turned our hearts toward God is a function, in the first place, of this intra-Trinitarian love of God.

(2) God's providential love protects us, feeds us, clothes us, and forbears to destroy us when mere justice could rightly write us off. The Lord Jesus insists that the evidences of God's provi-

dential love call us to faith and God-centered kingdom priorities (Matt. 6:25–34).

(3) God's yearning, inviting, commanding love, supremely displayed in the Cross, "compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Cor. 5:14–15). With Paul, we are debtors; we owe others the gospel.

(4) God's effective, electing love toward us enables us to see the sheer glory and power of Christ's vicarious death on our behalf, by which we are reconciled to God. We grasp that God has not drawn us with the savage lust of a rapist, but with the compelling wooing of a lover. Out of sheer love, God has effectively secured the salvation of His people. We love, because He first loved us.

(5) God continues to love us, not only with the immutable love that ensures we are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us (Rom. 8:37), but also with love like that of a father for his children, telling them to remain in His love (Jude 21). Thus we are disciplined in love that we might be loving and obedient children of the living God.

All this has transformed us, so that we in turn perceive the sheer rightness of the first commandment: to love God with all of one's heart, soul, mind, and strength (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). As that is the first and greatest commandment, so the first and greatest sin is not to love God with one's heart, soul, mind, and strength. For this, there is no remedy except what God Himself has provided—in love.