

“Saved from God’s wrath” (Part Two)

Reflection 22 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

When Paul pictures God’s wrath in Romans 1, he depicts it not as God intervening but as just the opposite. God quits intervening. Now catch this. The decadence of society is the wrath of God. “God gave them over,” Paul writes, three times: to the sinful desires of their hearts (1:24), to shameful lusts (1:26), to a depraved mind (1:28). It’s God listening to you again and again, insisting on your own way, and saying, “O.K.,” and then just walking off. Just walking off! He quits intervening.

God’s wrath in Romans 1, where Paul’s flow begins, is just letting cause and effect take over, letting people have their own way. And God has to be in a sense furious to do this, because it goes against every caring, nurturing, loving instinct God has. But the punishment of sin is sin. Hold on to that thought! The punishment for sin is sin. So consider your life. What are the implications of this for teasing out the patterns of your life and of the lives of people around you? Is it possible that God’s wrath is being revealed here now in the midst of our lives, in our anger, in our chronic anxiousness, by the ways we degrade our bodies, by the ways we are inflamed with sinful desires, by the ways our minds sometimes lose touch with reality? And the very things we think are signs of God’s grace are exactly the opposite. They are signs of his wrath. God’s permissiveness is his judgment on us.

Maybe we begin to see what Jesus was driving at when he would say, “Whoever does not believe stands condemned already” (John 3:18). God calls you to this; you want that. God wants you to do this; you want to do that. God creates you to become this; you want to become that.

So sometimes like a moth
we fly closer to the light and closer to the flame.
We want.
We want it so much.
We want it now.
We feel this is so right for us.
After all these years.
Closer to the light and closer to the flame.
We know there are risks.
Big risks.
We know we hurt others.
We know we leave others
doing what it's ours to do.
But we want.
We want it so much.
We want it now.

Closer to the light and closer to the flame.
 We know how this began.
 From dark, needy, lonely places in our soul.
 From deep hunger we cannot even name.
 But we want.
 We want it so much.
 We want it now.
 Closer to the light and closer to the flame.
 We cross a line.
 And then another.
 We burn a bridge.
 And then another.
 We may even call it love.
 We do want.
 We want it so much.
 We want it now.
 And after God has
 listened to us
 over
 and over
 and over,
 and still over again,
 God lets us.
 Apart from forcing us,
 God has no choice.
 We want it so much.
 And so we fly off
 closer to the light and closer to the flame.

And God's wrath is in letting us, in letting cause and effect take over. In all this, let's keep track of where the real alienation is, where the real anger is. Paul will write in Colossians 1:21, "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now [God] has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death." And now drawing on Romans 5, we have peace with God. We enter into grace. We now stand on that grace. We rejoice in our hope. Now we know that even in our suffering things are working out as they should. We are becoming stronger, wiser and more loving people. God pours out his love into our hearts by his Spirit. We are reconciled to God. And we will be saved from God's wrath, now and in worlds to come.

I am reminded of an exchange in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. The children have heard of the great lion, Aslan, in the Chronicles of Narnia, the Christ-figure.

Susan asks, “Is he [Aslan] – quite safe?”

“Safe?” says Mr. Beaver, “Who said anything about safe? ’Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good.”

In the end, is God’s wrath anything but love taken seriously? When God sees what is true and good and beautiful tarnished and destroyed, when God sees human duplicity, and violence, and betrayal, when God sees what we do in our anger and in our lust, how many we are willing to destroy to do what we want, what else could God feel? Perhaps love and anger are two sides of the same emotion, and maybe the reason I cannot quite comprehend the wrath of God is that I have never loved as God loves.

BUT here is the Gospel! We, now justified by his blood, will be saved from his wrath. Now God will not walk away from us. We are saved from the gathering nightmare of a life from which God has walked away: the permissiveness that seems so innocuous at first, the embarrassment when we think of what we have done, the ensuing moral paralysis, the personal disintegration, the gradual descent of sinful cause and effect into Gehenna. But now God has broken cause and effect. At the cross. And has made possible in our souls what could never otherwise happen. Peace. Grace. Joy. Love.

But beware the wrath of God, the day God lets go and lets you. You know the saying, “Let go and let God.” Consider also the day God lets go and lets you. The day God lets you – like a moth – fly closer to the flame, when you want what you want so much and you want it now, and you cross a line, and then another. You burn a bridge. And then another. And God listens to you over and over and over, and still over again, and God lets you. Apart from forcing you, God has no choice. You want it so much. And so you fly off closer to the flame.

May God turn your wantings into longings, longings for God, and show you the way back home, away from the flame, back into the light.

– Dale Pauls