Article: **JAW103**

THE GREAT COMFORT OF GOD'S WRATH

This article first appeared in the Viewpoint column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 29, number 2 (2006). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: http://www.equip.org

In the first book in his best-selling series, Conversations with God, Neale Donald Walsch describes God in a way that many people in the postmodern milieu find appealing. During an "uncommon dialogue" in which Walsch purports to take dictation from God Himself, God exposes the alleged myth of divine anger: "If you choose to believe in a God who somehow needs something—and has such hurt feelings if He doesn't get it that He punishes those from whom He expected to receive it—then you choose to believe in a God much smaller than I" (p. 65).

According to Walsch's god there is no such thing as "sin," only choices; therefore, although missteps by mortals may lead to unpleasant outcomes for them, they do not personally offend God. Walsch would have us believe that God is simply too large and enlightened to be angered at all.

The impact of this popular sentiment is widespread. My fellow students at the public university I attended expressed this view by saying, "I believe there's a God up there. But He doesn't care what I do. He's got better things to do than sit around getting mad at me." Many church pastors awkwardly negotiate biblical passages that portray divine wrath or choose to avoid them altogether, opting to focus exclusively on God's love and compassion. One must sympathize with waffling preachers, however, for to modern ears, parts of the Old Testament in particular can sound strange indeed.

"The Prophets Were Wrong." In the introduction to his commentary on Isaiah, John Goldingay writes, "God [at times] resembles a cruel despot, one furious at human failings, raving against enemies, and bloodthirsty for revenge." Goldingay does not discount the Jewish prophets' portrayals of God's wrath, but many liberal scholars do. They read the harsh language of the prophets as an expression of their bitterness at their marginalized position within ancient Jewish society. Others dismiss the portrayals as humanlike conceptualizations of the divine, typical of ancient religious texts. Even conservative Christians can waver on this point, asserting that these angry "rants" represent the imprecise view of God during the old dispensation, now nullified by greater revelation.

Fleeing the Old Testament is of little use, however; the New Testament offers ample evidence of God's anger as well. The Gospels record Jesus prophesying doom for recalcitrant cities. In Acts the Holy Spirit strikes Ananias and Sapphira dead in a seemingly capricious act of judgment. In the book of Revelation God's anger rises to an apocalyptic boil, spilling out on the earth.

From the earliest days of Christianity theologians have felt compelled to explain this vexing attribute of God. The influential early church father Origen (c. 185–254) describes God's anger by way of analogy. Like a father who must have a stern face when disciplining a child, so God must show us a stern face to save us from the consequences of sin. Origen writes, "If you hear of God's anger and wrath, do not think of wrath and anger as emotions experienced by God. Accommodations of the use of language like that are designed for the correction and improvement of the little child. We too put on a severe face for children."[1]

Origen's explanation is at least partly true. In the Bible, God clearly expresses His displeasure to effect repentance; but Origen goes beyond this. He writes, "God is not really wrathful or angry." According to Origen, God merely feigns anger to keep us from sin.

"So? God Understands." Origen's solution is attractive because we tend to view omniscience (i.e., infinite knowledge) and anger as antithetical or mutually exclusive. Walsh's writings also encapsulate this

fallacious sentiment. When one fully understands the causes of a person's action, the reasoning goes, anger toward that person dissipates. Defense lawyers know this well. If they can prove that a defendant suffered abuse as a child or was caught in extenuating circumstances, they may assuage the anger of a jury. A murderer who was beaten and abandoned as a child may even elicit sympathy.

This is not always the case, however. Not all perpetrators are victims who elicit sympathy; people with good backgrounds also can commit reprehensible deeds. As our understanding of a perpetrator and his evil deed grows, often our indignation will grow equally. Sometimes there is no explanation, nothing we can come to understand, that will excuse a person's evil actions and silence our anger. One police officer with whom I spoke relayed a case in which the murderer cited no reason for his crimes other than a desire to "see how it felt." Some actions are simply evil and rightly elicit anger.

We often, nonetheless, expect that because God knows us completely and understands our motivations, when we sin He sees the corresponding hurts and fears that caused us to err; therefore, we surmise, He can never truly be angry with us. Origen's explanation would allow us to believe in a God who transcends anger. We could label God's anger simply a divine ruse, meant for our own protection, and walk away grateful; but there are serious problems with this conclusion.

First, the Bible does not suggest such a theory. In no way do the descriptions of God's smoldering rage read like mere metaphor. The Bible describes sin as an affront to God Himself. It gives the impression that He would be enraged at evil were the whole of humanity nonexistent. He is incensed at unrighteousness, not only because unrighteousness harms His creation, but because it is contrary to His very nature.

Second, though Origen's explanation resolves one difficulty, it intensifies another—a dispassionate God magnifies the problem of evil. As the *New Dictionary of Theology* puts it: "It is a necessary part of moral character to abhor evil as well as to love good."[2]

Walsch understands the implications of God who is never angry. Adopting the divine perspective, Walsch writes: "I do not love 'good' more than 'bad.' Hitler went to heaven" (61). This shows the inevitable outcome of negating divine wrath. We end up embracing a god who looks indifferently at Auschwitz; a god too "enlightened" to be angry at the child molester—in short, a monster. Walsch's god may sell books and harmonize with Eastern notions of a dispassionate ideal, but the attractiveness of such a god disappears in the shadow of real evil. The conclusion is inescapable: a god who is never angry at evil is not a loving god. The angry God, however, cares. Christians should not treat God's divine anger like a dirty secret; it offers stirring proof of His divine love.

Origen understood God's wrath as a sign of His love. In this he was right. God certainly expresses His wrath for our benefit. Sin destroys His creatures, so He reveals and executes judgment to guide us and show us love. If we stop there, however, we miss the full biblical meaning of God's wrath. Origen failed to account for the fact that sin is also, in a very real way, an affront to God. It offends His holiness.

"Anger Is Anger." Many people today dismiss divine wrath because they misunderstand or diminish God's holiness. Perhaps in an effort to personalize God and make Him approachable, we lose sight of His identity as Creator, Judge, and sovereign Lord of the Universe. Whatever the reason, many people fail to see God as wholly other and transcendent and so mistakenly assume that His anger is the same as human anger.

Walsch's writings offer a perfect example of this common, fundamental misunderstanding. Walsch describes a wrathful God as one whose feelings are hurt if He doesn't get what He wants. Here Walsch commits the error of confusing divine anger with human anger. We are fallible; therefore we can become angry for the wrong reasons. Sometimes our anger is righteous (Eph. 4:26); but, since we are sinful, often it is not. God's anger is completely different. Since He is perfect, His anger remains untainted by unrighteousness. Again, the *New Dictionary of Theology* states, "While it is true that human anger often involves passion and loss of temper, such emotions are out of place in a consideration of the anger of God. When we speak of God's wrath we must supply the qualification 'without the imperfections we see in human anger at its best.'"

Walsch does not acknowledge this important distinction or even bother to argue for his bold conflation of divine and human wrath. Walsh is right, of course, to reject a god beset with human foibles, but the Bible does not present such a god. The result is that Walsch fails to address true divine wrath. Like many others who balk at God's wrath, he succeeds only in toppling a straw man (i.e., God as a petulant child), never addressing the true God (i.e., the wrathful, all-loving God as described in Scripture).

The Truth about God's Loving Wrath. Six years ago my family lost a close friend. Garrett was a gentle and compassionate young man who was brutally murdered for no apparent reason. His two assailants snickered during the court proceedings, even as his mother sobbed while also extending forgiveness to them. In such circumstances I am tremendously grateful that God is not indifferent. No, an angry God is actually a great comfort, for He assures us that evil will not prevail.

One of Christianity's unique characteristics is that it acknowledges the reality of evil. If evil is real, then God's attitude toward it must also be real, or else He is not a caring God. He is a caring God, however, and when we defy Him or perpetrate evil against those who are made in His image, He is not indifferent. His attitude toward real evil is always real wrath. It is ultimately a comforting wrath, however, because it is born of love. I can't imagine a God any larger than that.

— Drew Dyck

NOTES

1. Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer, eds., *Documents in Early Christian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1975), 7–10.
2. *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), s.v. "Wrath of God," 732.