

REFLECTIONS ON THE WRATH OF GOD

God's anger is a difficult subject that we must come to terms with.

The issue of God's wrath has become somewhat controversial within the Adventist Church in recent years.

The Bible speaks repeatedly of God's wrath. Psalm 2:5 says, for example, that God "rebukes [the kings of the earth] in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath" (NIV).** God said to Jeremiah, "'Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it'" (25:15).

Revelation echoes the same theme in the New Testament. In the most vivid description of God's

wrath anywhere in the Bible, it says that those who accept the mark of the beast will "drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger" (14:10, NASB). And Paul spoke several times about God's wrath in both Romans 1 and 2:

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** Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible quotations in this article are taken from the New International Version.

godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (1:18).

• "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" (2:5).

• "For those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger" (vs. 8).

The Bible clearly speaks of this issue, so what's the debate all about? Why is anyone questioning what the Bible seems to teach so clearly?

Active, Passive, and No Wrath

The issue is whether God's wrath is active or passive—or whether He has no wrath at all. Each alternative has its proponents.

Active Wrath. The "active wrath" model proposes that God has intervened personally, intentionally, and in some cases violently to put down evil in the past—and that He will do so even more forcefully in the future. The purpose of His active exercise of wrath is either to punish evil people for their sins or to deliver His own people from their grasp, and often both purposes merge into one.

An obvious example of God's active wrath in the past is His destruction of the sinful world at the time of the Flood. Another is His destruction of Sodom and Gomor-

rah with fire and brimstone. A third is His deliverance of Israel from Egyptian slavery with hail and fire and storm and the slaying of the firstborn of Egyptian animals and people. The destruction of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea was also active wrath.

The Bible also predicts that at least twice in the future God will intervene actively to punish evil and deliver His people. Most Christians are familiar with Revelation's description of fire coming down from heaven and devouring the wicked in the lake of fire at the end of the millennium (Rev. 20:9). God will also intervene forcefully in human history at the beginning of the millennium with the second coming of Christ. Revelation 6:12-17; 16:17-21 picture God destroying the Earth with a violent, global earthquake at Christ's second coming, and 19:11-20 shows Christ engaging the world's armies in a violent war that concludes with the destruction of the forces of evil.

Paul spoke of this active form of God's wrath in Romans 2: "Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath" (vs. 5). "The day of God's wrath" is clearly a reference to the second coming of Christ, and Paul said that unrepentant Jews were preparing themselves to experience that wrath.

He said essentially the same thing

in verse 8: “For those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.” Again, the words “there will be wrath and anger” are in the future tense, suggesting that the wrath and anger will be manifested at Christ’s second coming.

Passive Wrath. The active model of God’s wrath has prevailed exclusively within the Adventist Church throughout most of our history. The passive wrath model, however, gained a small but resolute following during the last three decades of the 20th century. This model proposes that God’s wrath is primarily exercised by His abandonment of evil to the natural outworking of its own destructiveness.

This is where Romans 1 is particularly relevant. Paul said that “the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (vs. 18). This verse could be interpreted to support the active wrath model. However, Paul wrote in the present tense—“the wrath of God *is being* revealed”—and there’s scant evidence of God’s active intervention in the lives of evil people at that time in history. Furthermore, several other statements Paul made in chapter 1 suggest that the passive wrath model is what he had in mind:

• “Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts

to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another” (vs. 24).

• “Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts,” and they “received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion” (vss. 26, 27).

• “[God] gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done” (vs. 28).

These verses support the passive wrath model, because they state that God simply gives sinful people over to the natural outworking of their sins, letting nature take its course.

No Wrath. This is actually a common theme of those who propose the passive wrath model, often arguing the passive wrath model in no wrath terms, claiming that anger is contrary to God’s character of love.

If the idea of “no wrath” is excluded from the passive wrath model, God’s wrath is both active and passive. Romans 1 makes it clear that God’s wrath is passive at times. In fact, the proponents of the passive wrath model are close to being correct when they suggest that this is the exclusive way God expresses His wrath. The incidents of His active intervention to put down evil with force in the history of our world are few and far between. And there’s a reason for this. Throughout nearly all of history, we humans have lived in probationary time. During this time, God has for the most part

We can safely begin by saying that any teaching about God's ultimate dealing with sin and sinners must be consistent with His love. The problem for us humans is how to bring together everything we know about God without creating unacceptable contradictions. How should love respond to evil? Does love always sit back and wait for evil to resolve itself, or does love at times intervene actively to prevent evil from carrying out its harmful designs?

allowed evil to run its course as a demonstration to the universe of what evil is really like.

However, it’s a mistake to make the passive model the complete explanation of God’s wrath. There’s too much biblical evidence that God has intervened actively to put down evil in the past and that He will do so again in the future.

Anger, Force, and God’s Love

Several years ago as editor of the *Signs of the Times*® I received a letter to the editor that illustrates the objection many proponents of the passive and no wrath models have to the idea that God’s wrath can also be active. This letter was in response to an article about Armageddon:

“I believe the view presented pictures God as arbitrary, vengeful, and severe, using His power to put down evil—the very characteristics that Satan attributes to God but that are actually characteristics of Satan himself. I do not believe that in the

end God will finally resort to force to put down evil.”

This raises a significant question: How does the idea of God’s wrath—especially the concept of His active wrath—square with the primary attribute of God’s character, which is love?

We can safely begin by saying that any teaching about God’s ultimate dealing with sin and sinners must be consistent with His love. The problem for us humans is how to bring together everything we know about God without creating unacceptable contradictions. How should love respond to evil? Does love always sit back and wait for evil to resolve itself, or does love at times intervene actively to prevent evil from carrying out its harmful designs?

It should be evident that active intervention *may* be the most loving thing that a loving being—divine or human—can do. A couple stories illustrate this point well.

The first is about a family in

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which the father sexually abuses his daughter. One day he goes into the girl's bedroom, and a few minutes later the mother hears the daughter crying out, "No, Daddy, no! Please, Daddy, stop!" So the mother goes to an adjoining room, kneels down, and prays for God to intervene.

In the second story, the teenage daughter of a farmer gets pregnant, but she hesitates to tell her parents because she fears that her father will kill her. Finally, however, it becomes impossible to hide the evidence, so before her father guesses the problem, she approaches him on the front porch of their cabin. When he learns that she's going to have a baby, he attacks her violently. In the midst of her screams, the front door to the cabin bursts open. The girl's mother leaps out, points a rifle at her husband, and shouts, "You strike my daughter one more time, and you're a dead man!"

Which mother showed the most love for her daughter—the one who prayed passively or the one who

intervened actively? The answer is obvious. In the face of severe abuse, active intervention is the most loving thing that a loving being can do. Not to do so would be unloving.

Those who favor the no-wrath concept argue that God doesn't become angry. This is what the correspondent who wrote to *Signs of the Times*[®] apparently believed. This view, however, involves a fundamental misunderstanding of anger, namely, that it's always bad.

Unfortunately, many Christians have grown up with the idea that anger is bad. I can recall as a child being told that anger was bad, but "righteous indignation" was OK. Nobody ever defined righteous indignation, but plain old anger was always bad. And the proponents of the passive model of God's wrath argue that, just as hot is the opposite of cold and light is the opposite of dark, so love is the opposite of anger and therefore anger is sinful, which is why a loving God will never become angry.

But what feeling would you experience if you saw a mother beating her five-year-old child with a piece of garden hose? Name the feeling you'd have if you saw a father hold the lighted end of a cigarette against his son's bare skin. Or how about the parents who keep a child tied to the bedpost or locked in a dark closet day after day for weeks on end, wallowing in its own excrement. These are extreme examples, to be sure, but they do happen. So what feeling did you get when you read about these examples of abuse?

Anger is our normal human response to injustice, and it's also a very loving response. It is bad only when we respond to it inappropriately, such as when we lose our tempers.

God never loses His temper, but His anger—His wrath—is a very appropriate and a very loving divine response to injustice. We all want an angry God from time to time. The cry, "Where was God when . . . ?" is a plea for an angry God. If we can feel anger over the little bit of abuse humans perpetrate against one another that we observe, how must God feel, who sees *all* the abuse that ever has happened and ever will happen?

I have a friend who believes that anger is contrary to God's character of love, so I asked him one day how he would feel if an intruder were to break into his house and rape one of

his teen-age daughters. He said, "Murderous." Then I asked him how he would want God to feel. He thought a moment, and then he said, "Murderous."

A number of years ago, my wife and I visited the World War II concentration camp in Dachau, Germany. We felt profound anger as we saw how Hitler treated Jews and other "undesirables." That was an entirely appropriate response.

Those who propose that God doesn't become angry are rightly concerned to avoid compromising His mercy. But mercy and justice need each other. Justice without mercy results in tyranny, abuse, and torture. But so does mercy without justice, for mercy without justice allows evil people to take charge, as in the case of the mother who prayed instead of intervening with force to protect her daughter. Justice that refuses to intervene to protect the victims of abuse is very unmerciful.

But should anger intervene with force? Our *Signs* correspondent said No, claiming that force is a characteristic of Satan. The stories of the two mothers, however, help us to understand that sometimes forceful intervention against evil is the most moral and the most loving thing we can do.

My correspondent at *Signs* said that force is a characteristic of Satan. It's true, of course, that Satan uses force—to impose suffering, not to prevent it. Often, Satan uses force to

get people to obey him. This God will never do. All who obey Him must do so by choice.

But does God ever use force? Is force ever an appropriate response for any loving being? Yes. Force is simply the exercise of power to bring about a desired result, and situations do exist in which it's absolutely essential that good people exercise force in order to prevent horrible evil from gaining control and creating chaos and suffering.

In the presence of intolerable evil, force is also an entirely appropriate response from a loving God. The Bible says that when Lucifer and his angels chose to rebel against God's law of love in heaven, Michael and His army of angels cast them out. That was force—God using His power to expel rebellion and evil from heaven. And the Bible teaches that an all-wise God will eventually exercise the same force to expel rebellion from the entire universe.

The Final Destruction of the Wicked

What about God's wrath in the final destruction of the wicked that's described so graphically in Revelation? Those who argue for God's passive wrath exclusively point out, correctly, that Revelation is highly symbolic. However, it doesn't follow that *everything* in Revelation is symbolic. Certainly the image of Christ riding a white horse at His second

coming is symbolic. This is simply a way of stating the literal truth that His second coming will be a time of war. And war is always an act of violent intervention. The images of birds eating the flesh of the wicked and of beasts being thrown into a lake of fire are highly symbolic, but the idea behind these images—that Christ will destroy evil and evil people with force at His second coming—is very literal.

Proponents of the passive and no-wrath models are quite horrified at the suggestion that God will exercise His active wrath in the final punishment and destruction of the wicked. I suspect this is because they consider all anger to be bad. But when we consider anger an appropriate response to evil and injustice, then it makes perfect sense for a loving God to be active as well as passive in dealing with it. And the biblical teaching about the final punishment of the wicked in the lake of fire is simply a picture—symbolic, perhaps, but true in a very real sense—of God intervening actively to put an end to evil.

Let's consider the prospect of God truly refusing to intervene with force to destroy the wicked, allowing their eternal demise to be simply the natural outworking of their choice to be evil. To do that, God would have to place them in a world all by themselves long enough for them to become extinct through degeneration, disease, and the reign of "tooth

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and claw." They would suffer a miserable, prolonged, pathetic extinction. When we have a dog or cat with a painful terminal illness, in mercy we ask the veterinarian to "put it to sleep." In the same way, God's forceful destruction of the wicked is a merciful alternative to truly allowing nature to take its course.

A common explanation suggested by those who support the passive model of God's wrath is that, rather than God Himself bringing fire down on the wicked, they'll be destroyed by the revelation of His glory in the final judgment. But to absolve God of the responsibility for the death of the wicked by saying "He will just unveil His glory" hardly gets Him off the hook. Imagine for a moment that I have a laser beam in my forehead that will kill people if I take my hat off in their presence. If I ever did that and were hauled into court for murder, what do you think the judge and jury would say to my plea that "I didn't kill anyone; I just took off my hat"?

If it's within my power not to take off my hat, then I'm responsible for those who die when I take it off, even if I didn't strike them.

The Bible's description of the final destruction of the wicked—fire coming down from God out of heaven—sounds like a releasing of the forces of nature that heretofore God has held in check. That's pretty violent! A proponent of the passive model of God's wrath might argue that God won't personally destroy the wicked in the lake of fire; He will simply release the forces of nature. That's like saying that I'm not responsible if my pit bull attacks and injures you because all I did was let go of the leash. I hardly think a judge would acquit me on that basis. If it's within my power to restrain the dog, then I'm responsible for the consequences when I let it go. Similarly, if it's within God's power to restrain the forces of nature, then it's hardly an argument in favor of the passive model of His wrath to say that the destruction of

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the wicked in the lake of fire is simply the result of His releasing the forces of nature.

My correspondent at *Signs* said that "God is not arbitrary, vengeful, or severe." It's true that God isn't arbitrary in His dealings with the wicked. An arbitrary God would destroy them with no consideration for what His loyal subjects thought. That's why God refused to eradicate sin the moment it arose in heaven many eons ago. He allowed it to continue for several thousand years so that all created beings could pass judgment against it for themselves.

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The life of every creature is ultimately in God's hands. Therefore, when the time comes that the wicked are permanently destroyed, God will

be responsible for their death, and whether He takes personal action to make that happen or merely allows it to happen is irrelevant. His justice is the reason that He will not only allow it to happen but will actually initiate its happening. And in the long-range scheme of things, that tragic event will be the most merciful thing a loving God could do!

Implications for the Atonement

The idea that God doesn't become angry—that He doesn't experience wrath—has major implications for understanding Christ's atonement for sin. In order to explain the problem, we need to consider a couple of theological explanations for why Jesus died.

One explanation is called the "substitutionary model" of the atonement. The substitutionary model is based on the very biblical concept that the punishment for sin

is death. However, a loving God didn't want to see His children die, so He devised a plan whereby Jesus would take the guilt of their sins upon Himself and suffer God's punishment in their place. His death would substitute for theirs. This would meet the demands of God's justice for the death of the sinner and give His erring children another opportunity to accept Him and allow His Spirit to control their lives. This model is strongly supported by both the Old and New Testaments.

The sacrificial system described in Leviticus is an excellent example of the substitutionary model of the atonement. When a person sinned, he was instructed to bring a lamb, a goat, or a bullock to the altar of sacrifice, confess his sins over it, and kill it in the presence of the priest. The priest would then sprinkle the blood of the sacrificial victim either on the altar or on the curtain inside the tabernacle. The Bible says that "in this way the priest will make atonement for the man's sin, and he will be forgiven" (Lev. 4:26). The conclusion seems inescapable that the animal took the sinner's guilt symbolically upon itself, died in the sinner's stead, and released the sinner from both the guilt for his sin and its punishment. It would be difficult to find a more obvious illustration of sacrificial substitution.

Isaiah 53 applied this concept to the suffering Servant, that is, the

Messiah: "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. . . . For the transgression of my people he was stricken. . . . The Lord [made] his life a guilt offering. . . . [He] . . . was numbered with the transgressors. . . . For he bore the sin of many" (Isa. 53:5, 8, 10, 12).

It's impossible to miss the concept in these verses that the suffering Servant took upon Himself both the guilt of human sin and its punishment. And there's an obvious use in verse 10 of the language of the Old Testament sacrificial system: "The Lord [made] his life a guilt offering." The King James Version says, "Thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin," and the New American Standard Bible says, "He would render Himself as a guilt offering."

Several New Testament passages affirm the concept of sacrificial substitution. One of the best is Galatians 3:13: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'" The tree is a reference to Christ's cross, by which Paul obviously means His death on the cross. And notice that Paul said that Christ became a curse for us, and by His death Christ "redeemed us from the curse of the law." That's clear substitutionary language.

The concept of substitutionary sacrifice is also evident in Ephesians 5:2, where Paul said that “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” In 2 Corinthians 5:21 Paul said, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” And Peter said that “Christ suffered for you,” and “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:21, 24).

There’s no question that the Bible teaches sacrificial substitution in both the Old and New Testaments.

The Moral Influence Model of the Atonement

According to the moral influence theory of the atonement, Christ didn’t die as a substitute for sinners. His death on the cross was simply a demonstration of God’s supreme love for human beings. Seeing this profound example of love, sinful people will be influenced to respond by seeking His forgiveness.

There’s no question that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was a marvelous demonstration of God’s love for the human race. Many texts in the New Testament attest to that. One of the best known and best loved is John 3:16: “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Ephesians 5:2, quoted earlier, also declares clearly

that Christ’s death on the cross demonstrated His love for us: “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” The idea of the cross as a demonstration of God’s love for lost sinners is so pervasive in the New Testament that it hardly needs further corroboration.

So what is to be made of these two theories of the atonement? It would be impossible for any one model of the atonement to encompass all that Christ’s death on the cross accomplished. Human analogies are too limited for that. Our best understanding of the atonement is provided by examining the strengths of each model (including several not considered here). The moral influence model helps us to understand the great love that God and Christ have for human beings and the great drawing power of their love. The substitutionary model helps us understand something of God’s justice, the importance of His law, and the seriousness of sin in His sight.

The problem with the moral influence theory is in what it denies rather than in what it affirms. As pointed out earlier, the moral influence theory denies that Christ died as a substitute for human sin. It claims that God didn’t need satisfaction for His justice. The law didn’t demand a penalty that had to be paid. Christ’s death was exclusively for the purpose of drawing human

beings to Himself in love. And that creates a major problem.

But what does this have to do with God’s wrath? The issue can be summed up in one simple question: What did Christ suffer on the cross? According to the substitutionary model of the atonement, by His death on the cross Jesus paid the price for human sin. And the price of human sin is to suffer the wrath of God that He will exercise against the wicked in the second death.

So did Christ suffer God’s active wrath or His passive wrath on the cross? Certainly, He suffered God’s passive wrath—God’s abandonment of sinners to the results of their sins. Jesus cried, ““My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”” (Matt. 27:46). That’s passive wrath.

Did God take an active hand in the death of His Son? The Bible isn’t so clear on that. However, if God took a hand at all in removing life from His Son on Calvary, that would be active wrath. If wrath is God’s punishment for sin, and if sinners will suffer God’s active wrath at the time of the second death, then it would certainly be consistent for God to have taken an active role in the death of His Son on the cross.

If Jesus didn’t suffer God’s wrath for sin on the cross in any sense, then the substitutionary model of the atonement makes no sense, and we’re left with the moral influence model. Jesus’ death was a demon-

stration of God’s love for His children and nothing more. But this would make about as much sense as a father jumping off a high bridge and drowning in the river below to show his son how much he loved him. If the son had fallen into the river, then the father’s jumping off the bridge to save him would truly be a demonstration of his love for his son. But jumping for no good reason would be a demonstration of the father’s foolishness, not his love.

At the very least, Christ suffered God’s passive wrath on the cross and very likely His active wrath as well.

The wrath of God that Paul spoke of in Romans 1 was largely God’s passive wrath. But in Romans 2 he clearly had in mind God’s active wrath at the end of the age, because in verse 5 he said, “Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath.” That’s an eschatological statement. Again, in verse 8 he said, “For those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.”

God does have wrath, and this quality is perfectly in harmony with His character of love. Indeed, if He didn’t experience anger over all the pain and suffering He observes in our world, He’d be like my cat, which can observe all manner of abuse going on around it—and sleep through it all. I don’t want a God like that! □