

Psalm 90 and the Wrath of God

By James E. Nelson

Psalm 90 is probably best known as the “off to work” psalm. It is one of the Thursday morning prayer psalms and it is commonly recited (especially by monks) at the start of the work day. The psalm also part of most funeral liturgies, although the liturgies typically don’t quote it as a whole, but rather use selected verses as exclamations or responses. This is not surprising given the theme of divine wrath that pervades the text. While some of the most sublime words of trust are found in it, some of the harshest words of judgment stand side by side with those words of trust.

In this paper I want to consider the psalm as a meditation on what God said to Adam in Gen 3:17-19. “Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” By considering the psalm in this context both the words of trust and divine wrath make sense as complimentary themes.

An Overview of the Text of Psalm 90

The psalm (the complete text of which can be found in the appendix, p. 10) begins with a beloved statement on the character of God: “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (vv 1-2). But just when you think this is a psalm of confidence in God, it takes an unexpected turn: “You turn us back to dust, and say, ‘Turn back, you mortals.’ For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night” (vv 3-4). And this sense of melancholy continues in the next stanza. Life is “like grass that is renewed in the morning ... [but] in the evening it fades and withers.”

A new and surprising theme shows up in the fourth stanza. “For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance” (vv. 7-8) Unexpectedly (given how the psalm began), this psalm becomes a meditation on divine wrath:

- “For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh” (v. 9).
- “Who considers the power of your anger?” (v. 11).
- “Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil” (v. 15).

In the midst of these “wrath” statements we find the stanza that initially drew my attention to Genesis 3. “The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away” (v. 10).

Psalm 90 from Adam's Point of View

“Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.” Could not have Adam said something similar to this as he thought back on his life in Eden? This opening stanza, read without context, sounds like a simple affirmation of the love of God. But, in the context of what follows in the psalm, it can just as easily be read as a despondent reflection on what used to be compared to the here and now:

God, you *were* our dwelling place, but *now* you turn us back to dust and all our days pass away under your wrath. In Eden we had your presence ever with us, we had a life of blessedness. But since you, O God, have cursed the ground, the days of our life are seventy years and their span is only toil and trouble. In Eden we had the gentleness of the morning dew, but now we know the power of your anger.

Keeping in mind this longing for what was, the plea in v. 14 (near the end of the psalm) is particularly moving. “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.” Within the context of this sometimes desperate psalm, these words express a yearning for something that was known but is now clearly absent.

But this is not a hopeless psalm (like Psalm 88), This psalm ends with a benediction of sorts, an acknowledgement that God is not against us but for us, and that in spite of the “toil and trouble” in our short span of years, God is still ready to look favorably upon us: “Let your works be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands – O prosper the work of our hands” (vv. 16-17).

“The Wrath of God” in Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Roman Catholic and Protestant) Thought

I suppose the reason Psalm 90 caught my attention is that I have been rereading Brian Gerrish’s book on John Calvin’s sacramental theology entitled, *Grace and Gratitude*.¹ The book is a reminder that Calvin was not much of a Calvinist and that much of what we think of as “Calvinism” was actually formulated decades after his death.

But Calvin was a true child of western medieval theology and sensibilities and, as a result, was very much focused on the wrath of God as one of the primary truths of existence. In contrast, the Christian east has never considered divine wrath as a significant part of the doctrine of salvation or human existence. To help us explore this difference, consider Book 1, Chap. 16 of the *Institutes* which begins as follows:

All that we have hitherto said of Christ leads to this one result, that condemned, dead, and lost in ourselves, we must in him seek righteousness, deliverance, life and salvation, as we are taught by the celebrated words of Peter, “Neither is there

¹ B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin*, Fortress Press, 1993.

salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved,” (Acts 4:12).

I think the word order is critical if we are to understand the fundamental difference between Calvin (and western theology in general) and the eastern Christian sensibilities. “We must seek righteousness, deliverance, life and salvation.” “Righteousness” and “deliverance from sin” precede the gift of divine life in Calvin’s thought. In Calvin’s (and Protestant) theology the fundamental problem is sin which leads to death. In Orthodox teaching it is death that leads to our sin. For Calvin and the Protestants the sin problem (and the resulting wrath of God) must be overcome before the offer of life can be made (as Calvin put it, “deliverance” then “life”).

For the Orthodox it is the gift of life itself which is prior and makes deliverance and the defeat of sin possible.² This puts divine wrath into a completely different perspective for the Orthodox. Wrath is not a posture of God against humanity, it is rather a human experience in the face of our guilt and the presence of the living and holy God. We broke creation, which was made “very good,” and in that brokenness we experience suffering, toil, and hardship. All of that brokenness and alienation is experienced as divine wrath, but that experience doesn’t tell us anything about God’s character, only about our guilt and brokenness.

We see this quite clearly in Col 1:21-23.

And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

In this text it is not God who is hostile and angry toward humans, it is humans who are “estranged and hostile in mind” toward God. In turn, the solution is not to have Christ change the Father’s mind about us, but rather to have Christ reconcile us to the Father.³

² At this point we are getting into deep waters. I don’t want to gloss over the issue but at the same time I don’t want to get bogged down in a technical theological debate. At the heart of this matter is the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of “ancestral sin” and the corresponding western doctrine of “original sin” subsequently developed by Augustine, et. al. The eastern doctrine of ancestral sin teaches that what we inherited from Adam was *death*. I am not born a sinner, but I am born spiritually dead. I inherited this death from Adam who died spiritually because he sinned. I, in turn, will inevitably sin because I have no spiritual life. The Western doctrine of original sin, in contrast, teaches that Adam’s *sin* is passed down, so that I am born a sinner. In Orthodox teaching, since what is passed from Adam is death, the fundamental and primary effect of salvation is new life. In western teaching, since what is passed from Adam is sin, the fundamental and primary effect of salvation is “righteousness and deliverance from judgment” (to quote Calvin), that is, escape from the wrath of God.

³ Romans 5 seems to describe this relationship quite differently: “Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were

And this brings us back Psalm 90 and Genesis 3.

What happened at Eden Anyway?

Adam and Eve were created in a state of innocence and lived in an idyllic world where their every need was met. That being said, it was not a life of leisure, for they were commanded to work, that is, to tend the Garden. But their toil was done in the context of constant fellowship with God. It was a joyful task.

Along with the command to work, Adam and Eve received the command to not eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; but, as a result of the subtle words of the serpent and the beauty of the tree itself, Eve, and then Adam, ate of that tree thus disobeying God. In Gen. 3:22 God said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever."

Do we find wrath in this verse? No. Do we find judgment? No. Instead, we find concern which led to the grace and mercy of God. After the sin of eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden so that they could not eat of the Tree of Life and physically live forever in their present spiritually dead state. Physical death was a gift making new life and perfection possible in the future.

Of course life outside the Garden was far different than life within it. Their lives had gone from idyllic to hard. Adam and Eve's relationship with God is not described outside the Garden, but we can infer from the text that while fellowship with God was the hallmark of life within the Garden, sorrow (and absence?) was the hallmark outside. And most significant of all, death was now always present. Adam and Eve had covered themselves with fig leaves but God replaced the fig leaves with something different: He sacrificed an animal and made them clothing of skin.

Their clothing is rich with symbolic meaning. It points forward to Christ's sacrifice on the cross (the death of the animal) and it also points forward to baptism and the new reality that we can be clothed with Christ. But I suspect all those veiled symbols were lost on Adam and Eve because

enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life" (vv 9-10). The "problem" with the relationship in this text is seemingly on the divine side rather than the human side, as it was in Col. 1. I refer to Rom 5 so that my readers understand that this subject is far from crystal clear in scripture. The various texts that talk about the relationship between sinful humans and the Holy God can seem contradictory. In this particular case, the Orthodox believe that "the wrath of God" is the same thing as "the love of God." And consequently being saved from the wrath of God is not escaping God, but rather experiencing God's love, not as wrath, but as righteousness. If the love of God is like fire, then a believer experiences that loving fire like gold in the furnace and the heart is purified (1 Pet. 1:7). The unbeliever's experience of God is no different, but having rejected the love of God, they experience the fire of God's love like chaff which "will burn with unquenchable fire" (Mat. 3:12, Luk. 3:17). With this in mind, we are saved through Christ from the wrath of God, not by escaping the fire, but rather, because of our transformation in Christ, God's love is experienced as purifying and life-giving fire rather than wrathful and destructive fire. So Rom. 5 (along with other passages about divine wrath) can be consistently interpreted in an Orthodox manner as long as one understands the two sided coin of the fire of divine love.

these things had not yet been revealed. For them the skins were simply a reminder of death, and as those skins wore out, probably a reminder of God's words to Adam, "You are dust and to dust you shall return."

Is it any wonder that this new experience of life would be interpreted by Adam and Eve as the wrath of God?

The Normal Disciplined Life Experienced as Wrath

My brother-in-law teaches at a Christian military school. While there are kids that attend simply for the quality of education, most of them are there because they have few options left. They have been expelled from public school; their parents are at wits end trying to raise them. The kids were on the shortcut to serious trouble with drugs, the law, or death before they were sent off to military school.

Student life is highly regimented. The kids are forced into a life of discipline whether they want it or not. Those who break the rules receive quick punishment. It may be running to the road and back, or pushups, or deep knee bends, or marching around the square with one's backpack on, even in the hot sun.

I suspect the students think the teachers hate them, especially after the first couple of weeks of school. But do the instructors hate the students? No. Are they full of wrath toward the students? No. (Well, the instructors are sinful humans, so they probably have their days.) Is the highly regimented life simply a vindictive and wrathful way of getting back at the students because they're rotten little citizens? No.

Although from the students' perspective it almost certainly seems that way.

Hopefully the analogy to life after Eden is obvious. Eating the forbidden fruit was a short cut in the process of attaining God's likeness. But the short cut, rather than giving Adam and Eve what they desired, brought death and brokenness (the exact opposite of what they desired) into the world. In a broken world populated by humans who think it's easier to take short cuts than learn to live life the proper way, life is hard. The world God ultimately intended is not a life of leisure, but rather a life of work, not of drudgery, but rich in God's full blessing beyond measure. (At least I assume drudgery is not included in the statement, "God put the man in the Garden to work it and care for it" Gen. 2:15.) But in order to participate in those blessings beyond measure we need to have the growth and discipline necessary to participate as God intended.

But the normal disciplined life – even the victorious and fruitful Christian life – while blessed, is not easy. As Paul told Timothy, "Share in suffering like a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 2:3). In the next three verses, Paul offers three images that express well the attributes of a disciplined life: "No one serving in the army gets entangled in everyday affairs; the soldier's aim is to please the enlisting officer. And in the case of an athlete, no one is crowned without competing

according to the rules. It is the farmer who does the work who ought to have the first share of the crops” (2 Tim. 2:4-6).

The soldier suffers lack of comfort and needs to endure difficulties beyond measure. But the reward for this discipline is the *esprit de corps* of life in the regiment. The athlete suffers greatly, even during competition, all for the glory of the prize. The farmer toils in weather fine or foul and is not rewarded for his labors for months.

All these images express a different facet of the discipline necessary to live in the world God created. Success requires suffering, pain, hardship, and delayed satisfaction. Only those who are converted to a particular way of thinking find such a prospect exhilarating. Others find it merely burdensome. For those whose hearts are turned against God and are looking for a shortcut to illumination, life itself is perceived as divine wrath.

This is the interplay of trust, discouragement, fear, and fatigue that we see in Psalm 90. The flow from one theme to the other and back again makes particular sense if viewed from the perspective of Genesis 3. Looking back we have an intimate knowledge and great confidence in God who is our dwelling place and was reliable even before “the mountains were brought forth.” But looking forward we see a day of toil and hardship, of weeds and brokenness. And in that brokenness we hear the whispers from ancient Eden: “You are dust and to dust you shall return.” Even though we have great confidence in God who is our dwelling place, as we consider the world into which we now step, we can’t help but say with the psalmist and Adam, “All our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh” (v. 9).

Divine Wrath and Judgment

One more thing must be said about our human perception of divine wrath. In the context of Psalm 90 and the expulsion from Eden we’ve talked about wrath as a human experience in contrast to a divine activity. But to say that is to only talk about half the story of divine wrath. So this study would not be complete without at least some comment on the other side of wrath.

The word “wrath” is used 200 times in the King James Version of the Bible and 270 times in the New Revised Standard Version. It is a common enough theme that it can’t be ignored.

- “You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans” (Ex. 22:22-24).
- “Moses said to Aaron, “Take your censer, put fire on it from the altar and lay incense on it, and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them. For wrath has gone out from the LORD; the plague has begun” (Num. 16:46).
- “Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD, and did not carry out his fierce wrath against Amalek, therefore the LORD has done this thing to you today” (1 Sam. 28:18).
- “Therefore says the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: Ah, I will pour out my wrath on my enemies, and avenge myself on my foes!” (Isa. 1:24).

- “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient” (Eph. 5:6).

In these various contexts, is God truly angry or is it a turn of phrase, an allowance for human limitation and weakness? And if God truly is full of wrath, what does that mean for a perfect and infinite being? It certainly means something different for God than it does for sinful humans.

When one reads the literature on divine wrath, a couple of things become clear. First, it is a subject that makes people uncomfortable. Does this put God into the same category as an abusive spouse? Is the Christian God any different than the Greek pantheon? (Granted, these opinions are extreme, but the idea of divine wrath being talked about some 200 times in scripture raises these sorts of questions among all sorts of people.) Second, even if you dismiss the exegetes who have an agenda or an axe to grind, interpretations of the meaning of divine wrath are prolix and diverse. There is no simple explanation. With this in mind, the following things can be said.

First, while humans are created in God’s image, God is not human. The fiery explosiveness and unpredictability of human anger is certainly not the place to begin understanding divine wrath. Divine wrath is certainly not the same thing as God losing his temper because he’s having a bad day with creation. We need to avoid defining God’s actions in terms of human attitudes, and especially sinful human attitudes.

That being said, if we are to try to understand God at all we have to explain divine action in the context of human culture. It is therefore perfectly understandable (although not necessarily correct) that medieval scholars saw divine justice and wrath in terms of what we think of today as the age of chivalry. Medieval and early Protestant scholars speak of the necessity that God has to protect his honor or defend his good name. That’s simply bizarre to many modern readers, but makes perfect sense in a medieval context.

Similarly, running away from the concept of divine wrath simply because child abuse is common and the subject of anger reminds some people of all the worst aspects of patriarchal society (which our society, whether correctly or incorrectly, has determined to be a great evil), is not surprising in the world of this new millennium. But such an interpretive stance would seem strange indeed to the aforementioned medieval scholar.

In short, a subject as mysterious and touchy as divine wrath brings out all of our sinful human and cultural defenses. It makes an honest appraisal of the text nearly impossible. This is why interpretations of the meaning of divine wrath are prolix and diverse.

So a second observation is in order. We need to admit that sometimes it’s better to allow an image to keep its poetic mystery rather than attempt to explain the precise meaning.

Metaphorical language has the ability to mean more than it can say, to borrow a wonderful phrase from Michael Polanyi. The need (and I might add, the sinful, human need) to create precise definitions can strip proper meaning from scriptural language that can point to truths far beyond the words themselves. Or, as John Calvin put it (referring to the Eucharist rather than wrath in

this context), “How it happens, I confess, is far above the measure of my intelligence. Hence, I adore the mystery rather than labor to understand it.”⁴

I therefore do not want to say too much about active divine wrath for fear of simply saying too much and undermining the truth of scripture with too many words about scripture. But, using scripture itself as a guide, I believe there is at least one more thing we can say about divine wrath because there is one text that brings us into the inner character of the wrath of God, and that is Romans 1.

Righteousness and Wrath in Romans

In Romans 1:16f, Paul presents the theme of the epistle. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.” After stating the theme, Paul launches into the substance of his argument, beginning with creation, sin, man’s rejection of God and the wrath of God in response to all this. That seems like quite a change of subject: from the gospel which reveals the righteousness of God to the wrath of God toward sinful man.

But there is a remarkable parallel as he moves from one subject to the next. I begin with v. 17, “For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed.”⁵ In the very next verse Paul says, “For the wrath of God is revealed ...”⁶ He moves from one section to the next by making a remarkable parallel, lining up two opposite ideas in seemingly equivalent statements. I will not claim there’s an absolutely obvious parallel in this text because the emphasis of the two sentences is somewhat different. (I included the Greek text in the footnotes to show the difference. In verse 17 Paul begins the sentence with the word “righteousness.” Literally, “Righteousness of God is revealed.” In verse 18 he begins with “revelation.” Literally, “Revealed: the wrath of God.”)

And yet, the similarities are so striking I think it is unavoidable to make the connection. Righteousness and wrath are, in a sense, equivalent. If you experience this revelation from the posture of faith, it is experienced as righteousness and life. If, on the other hand, you experience this revelation from the posture of godlessness and wickedness, it is experienced as wrath. This connection is made again in 2:5. : “But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up **wrath** for yourself on the day of wrath, when God’s **righteous judgment** will be revealed. For he will repay according to each one’s deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, **he will give eternal life**; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, **there will be wrath and fury**” (Rom 2:5-8).

⁴ Letter from Calvin to Peter Martyr, 8AUG1555, quoted from B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, p. 128, n. 14.

⁵ The Greek text of v. 17 says, δικαιοσύνη γὰρ θεοῦ ἐν ἀποκαλύπτεται.

⁶ The Greek text of v. 18 says, Ἀποκαλύπτεται γὰρ ὀργὴ θεοῦ.

Active and Passive Wrath

In Psalm 90 we saw how the psalmist described his experience of a broken and sinful world as the wrath of God. We could call this “passive wrath.” God never intended life to be easy. Even in Eden where Adam and Eve could have grown from innocence toward perfection, life would have been work, but it would have been work done in a world created “very good” in the presence of perfect fellowship with God.

Life in the fallen world is still hard. In fact it’s probably harder (but to tell the truth, we don’t know that). But there is a further difference. The hardness of life is now experienced in the context of futility, with a sense of our own mortality, and in the absence of God (at least the manner God was present in Eden). This is the experience the psalmist described as wrath. It doesn’t mean that God is mad at us; it only means that we experience life in terms of difficulty and divine absence.

But no matter how we experience it, the fact remains that this life is a gift. What we perceive as wrath can also be recognized as a means of learning. What we perceive as futility can, through the gift of faith, be recognized as a means of self-discipline, if we only have the eyes to see. What we perceive as wrath from the weakness of our sinful human flesh can just as easily be seen as pure grace with eyes of faith. What we perceive as impending death can just as easily be recognized as a blessed opportunity for new life in Christ.

It’s the same circumstances seen from a different perspective. It is two sides of the same coin.

We could call what the psalmist describes in Psalm 90 “passive wrath.” But we also recognized that there is a far more active sense of divine wrath in scripture. And to understand that we turned from the psalmist to Paul.

What we discovered in Romans 1 is that the same principle we discovered about passive wrath and unending human toil, about death and life – that they are two sides of the same coin – is true of active wrath, or the judgment of God. God comes to us in righteous love. For those who welcome it, it is purifying and life-giving. For those who reject it, it’s destructive and experienced as fiery judgment.

But what we learn especially and uniquely from Psalm 90, in the context of Genesis 3, is that there is nothing opposite about wrath and love, about life and death, about futility and growth. In the same breath we can say, “Lord, you have been our dwelling place for generations,” and “For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh.” And these two sentiments do not reflect a changeable God, only the conflicting reality of existing in the image of God in a fallen and sinful world. Wrath and righteousness: we breathe them in and speak them out in the same breath. That is the mystery of the human condition.

Appendix: Psalm 90 (Psalm 89 in the Septuagint)

- ¹Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.
- ²Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
- ³You turn us back to dust,
and say, "Turn back, you mortals."
- ⁴For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.
- ⁵You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
⁶in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.
- ⁷For we are consumed by your anger;
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.
- ⁸You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.
- ⁹For all our days pass away under your wrath;
our years come to an end like a sigh.
- ¹⁰The days of our life are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.
- ¹¹Who considers the power of your anger?
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.
- ¹²So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.
- ¹³Turn, O LORD! How long?
Have compassion on your servants!
- ¹⁴Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
- ¹⁵Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us,
and as many years as we have seen evil.
- ¹⁶Let your work be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.
- ¹⁷Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands —
O prosper the work of our hands!