

The Anger of God and Our Propitiation

1 John 2:1-2 *My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.*

In most translations you should see the word *propitiation* in I John 2:2 (the NIV renders it 'atoning sacrifice').

This word '*propitiation*' refers to an attribute of God about which you seldom hear today. It has to do with the awesome and fearsome attribute of God's anger, God's wrath.

God's anger is certainly not a popular theme today. I don't know of many songs which sing of God's anger – most of them are so self-absorbed they wouldn't know where to begin with a topic like this. Walk into the Christian bookstore and ask them for a recent book on God's anger. The chances are, they will have no idea where to find one.

In fact, you will hear professing Christians quite explicitly expressing their contempt for the anger of God. They will say things like, "We mustn't portray God as some kind of angry, fire-and-brimstone God. That alienates people." You will hear others say, "I don't like the Old Testament God. I like the New Testament God of love and peace." When people say, "I don't want to hear about an angry, fire-and-brimstone God" I am tempted to reply, "When last **did** you actually hear of one? When last did you actually sit through a sermon which spoke of God's anger? When last did you really hear about the wrath of God?"

No, when you compare the content of our songs; the topic of our average sermons; the light-hearted attitude toward truth; the lack of understanding of the fear of the Lord, with the Christianity of the Puritans, or the Reformers, or the mystics, or the early church, or ancient Israel, you have a strong contrast. Believers of old feared, admired, and in some ways, praised the anger of God. We are perplexed, confused and frankly a bit embarrassed by the anger of God.

The fact that we struggle with seeing God as an angry God reveals two things about us:

1) It reveals a lack of judgement, or a lack of discernment.

We think it is nicer to be cheery, sunny and upbeat; we think being angry is rather ugly. So we cannot even imagine how anger could be holy or pure, much less beautiful. This is a sign of a lack of judgment. When we judge rightly, we feel rightly. When we judge something to be harmful, evil, destructive, we should be outraged, angry; desirous to have that thing removed, changed or destroyed. When we judge something to be holy, beautiful, true, we should cherish it, protect it, delight in it. When a man sees a teenager mugging an elderly lady and does not know how to feel – it shows he has lost the sense of judgement. He should judge such an act to be contemptible; outrage should well up inside him, and he should seek to stop that act and punish that evildoer. If he stands by and thinks – "How should I feel about this? Should I get angry about this?" then we would know his sense of judgement is impaired.

So when we shy away from the idea of God being angry, it shows our judgement is poor, our discernment is weak. For us to think that God should not be angry is basically to say, there is nothing for God to be angry about. There is no cause for God to be angry. As we look around the world, life, humanity – it does not make us angry; so we may ask 'Why should God be angry about it?' In other words, we think God's anger is petulant, temperamental – like the angry outbursts of a father, which we try to cover up and play down, hoping he doesn't flare up when we have company.

2) It is also a sign of being apathetic and lukewarm.

People who are lukewarm about most things frown not only upon anger, but also upon extreme zeal.

They want all their affections to be watered down. The man of zeal and of great passion does not struggle with the idea of anger. He not only knows that some things should make him angry, he knows what kind of anger comes out of him. When Christ came to the Temple and saw the abuses, the exploiting of the poor; the brazen greed and covetousness thriving at the footsteps of a place of worship, He was not confused as to how He should feel. He was not uncertain about Himself. His love for the Father's glory was such a pure love, it produced a pure hatred for that which defiled His Father's glory. The one who has great love, high affections for God, knows that some things demand anger; to not be angry over them would not be a sign of holiness, it would be a sign of unholiness. When we are not angry over what makes God angry, it shows that our affections have been dulled, diluted, so that we are not feeling what we should feel. When we think God should not be angry, it shows we have been conformed to this world, to become less sensitive to reality, less alive, less passionate; people who just want their money and their entertainment and don't want too much trouble.

Too often this lack of judgement, these lukewarm affections, cause us to remake God in our own image. Instead of letting the Scriptures shape us, instead of allowing ourselves to be moulded into God's image, we want God to be in our image.

But in contrast to this, the Bible is very open and forthright about God's anger. It mentions it over 300 times. In fact, God's anger is more than once an attribute of God being worshipped. We see in Revelation – the redeemed saints praising God for His judgment, for the wrath of the Lamb poured out on the world.

So what does the Bible teach us about God's anger, and what does it have to do with the propitiation we read about in I John 2:2?

One of the clearest descriptions of God's anger is found in Nahum 1.

I. The Nature of God's Anger

God's anger comes out of His jealous justice (Nahum 1:2)

Part of God's anger is holy jealousy. Jealousy speaks of love. People who love are jealous. Jealous is zealous with a possessive edge to it. What God owns and prizes, He is jealous over. The thing He is most jealous over is His own glory. And the thing which continually insults that glory is sin. So His anger acts to recover and vindicate what sin does to His glory.

God's anger is His fury at the health of His universe being attacked by the cancer of sin. He hates it with perfect hatred because it warps and deforms what He loves so very much. He hates sin so intensely because of what it does to what He loves so intensely. The fury and outrage you would have against someone torturing your children; the burning hatred you would have for a disease killing your parent or child or loved one, is just a shadow of the intensity of rage God has at that which mars His perfect universe.

His anger is also a just anger. Notice the words '*avenge*' and '*vengeance*'. Vengeance is punishment, retribution, penalty on enemies. Look at verse 3 of Nahum 1- "*he will not acquit the wicked*". God will not turn a blind eye to sin, because He loves His name. He loves His glory. The degree He loves His name is the degree to which He will arrest, prosecute, convict and punish lawbreakers; criminals – sinners.

He is perfect, and will accept nothing less than His perfect rule in His universe. Therefore, sin outrages Him. Sin defies His justice, breaks His law, rebels against His authority and insults His glory.

God's anger is jealous justice.

II. The Slowness of God's Anger (Nahum 1:3)

The good news about this anger is that it is very slow to be stirred up to full strength. God is in full control of His anger. Notice the words '*and great in power*'. God's power and His anger are in perfect harmony. God is not controlled by His anger and one of His glories is that He is not easily provoked. Though the slightest sin is a great insult to God, God is not touchy or moody or unpredictable. God does not have angry outbursts. God is long suffering. God's anger is not like gunpowder, it is like wet wood. There must be much provocation, much in the way of sinful sparks and flames to arouse it to its full intensity.

You might say in very common terms, God is not looking for a fight. He is not trying to find reasons to pour out His judgement; He is seeking to withhold it so that men may repent.

III. The Ferocity of God's Anger (Nahum 1:3b-6)

But having heard of how slow His anger is to ignite, the prophet tells us what it is like when His patience is withdrawn, and His anger comes out in full force.

Truly, when I consider how the goodness of God is abused and perverted by the greatest part of mankind, I cannot but [believe that]-the greatest miracle in the world is God's patience and bounty to an ungrateful world. If a prince hath an enemy got into one of his towns, he doth not send them in provision, but lays close siege to the place, and doth what he can to starve them. But the great God, that could wink all his enemies into destruction, bears with them, and is at daily cost to maintain them. ..

But think not, sinners, that you shall escape thus. God's mill goes slow, but it grinds small; the more admirable his patience and bounty now is, the more dreadful and unsupportable will that fury be which ariseth out of his abused goodness. Nothing blunter than iron, yet when sharpened it hath an edge that will cut fatally. Nothing smoother than the sea, yet when stirred into a tempest nothing rageth more. Nothing so sweet as the patience and goodness of God, and nothing so terrible as his wrath when it takes fire. (William Gurnell – The Christian in Complete Armour)

I cannot do justice to the truth of God's anger except to say that it is, again and again, compared to fire. Here, in Nahum, it is again called fire. In Hebrews 12:29, we read, *our God is a consuming fire*. Sodom and Gomorrah were judged with fire. The final judgement on the rebellious people of this world will be by fire, as predicted in Revelation 21. Of course, the final place of the unsaved is called the lake of fire.

Why should fire picture anger? Fire is like God's anger in many ways:

It is powerful. It is hot, it is intense. Fire literally burns with intense heat, as does God's anger when aroused to full expression. As Nahum says – '*Who can stand before Him?*' God's anger is completely overwhelming. You may as well try to stand your ground before a hurricane than try to weather the anger of God. Mountains melt, what will you, who stand less than two metres tall, do before Him? The very earth heaves! Do you think you will be unshaken before Him? It is easier to hold back the waters gushing from a burst dam wall than to stand before God's anger.

It is purifying. Fire purifies, and so God's anger purifies the world, and ultimately the universe. God's anger destroys, as fire destroys. If God sets out to remove that which is dishonouring Him it

will be removed. Like a surgeon burning out a cancerous growth, He will not rest until it is gone – all of it.

But this is worth thinking about. Almost whenever God revealed Himself to people, whether to Isaiah, Ezekiel, Moses, Daniel, John, there was something of fire in the manifestation, and God was not angry in those appearances. Fire pictures God's holiness.

Why is fire a picture of His holiness and also a picture of His anger? Why do we see fire surrounding Him in heaven, and fire in hell? I would say – God's anger is His holiness demanding more holiness. It is the fire, seen at rest, by those men, now moving to burn out that which hates His glory.

Now what does all this have to do with Christ and His crucifixion?

Christ was the propitiation for our sins.

What does propitiation mean? It has direct reference to the anger of God expressed in judgement. Propitiation means Jesus satisfied the demands of God's justice, and so turned away His anger.

God's anger is furious and will break upon the head of sinners. But the offering of Jesus satisfied the demands of God and so turns away the anger. What God's anger was seeking, what God's anger was demanding, it found in the sacrifice of Jesus; so there was no need to remain angry. All that God's anger was calling for – the punishment of the sinner, the satisfaction of the holiness of the Law – was found in that one offering.

But, like in the Old Testament, the anger fell on the sacrifice – its neck would be broken, its neck would be slit, it would be killed and bleed – so here the anger fell on Jesus.

Jesus represented what made God furious. Therefore, as He voluntarily stood there – in the place of the object of wrath, He experienced that wrath. It broke upon His head. Just as a lightning conductor draws the growing electrical charge in the clouds, in the form of a lightning bolt striking it, so Jesus, by appearing in the place of mankind, was the lightning conductor of God's anger. He stood there as the centre target of God's arrows, the model of how God feels about sin.

He experienced what a sinner experiences when God's patience has been withdrawn.

He experienced God's displeasure. The sun darkened, symbolic of the light of God's face turned away in disapproval and disgust. Jesus was wearing the combined sins of millions upon millions of sinners. There is no voice from heaven saying '*This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased*' now. God hates what Jesus was representing at that time.

He experienced God's retribution - the excruciating pain; the searing thirst; the darkness, the loneliness, the humiliation; all signs of God's judgement on the sin. He was experiencing the essence of eternal torment.

He experienced God's absence - something He had never known – for He had always done the things which pleased the Father. He had often said, 'I am in the Father and the Father is in Me.' Now He was without that communion. He was a sin bearer, plunged into the agony of complete alienation from God. He was experiencing the horror of God having shunned Him, given Him up, refusing to consider Him.

For three earthly hours, Jesus endured the weight of eternal wrath. You will notice if you study the crucifixion accounts that the darkness comes upon the land at 12pm, or midday; but it is three hours later, that Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me?" If the darkness was the period of God's deep displeasure, of His time of judgement on sin, then it had been going on for

three hours. I think that Jesus cried out, not at the beginning of that time of enduring the Father's wrath, but towards the end – when it seemed to go on and on and on, and humanly speaking it seemed as if it would never end. And from that place of enduring wave after wave after wave of God's anger dashing upon Him for three hours, He cries out “My God, why have you forsaken Me?” - will this never end?

What man can endure the wrath of God? (Nahum 1:6). No sinful man. But the God-man – He could.

I imagine a man standing on the shore as a massive tsunami rears up, making the man seem tiny next to it, and then it completely overwhelms him, covering him with water, swallowing him up totally. And as we watch, we see a puzzling thing – the tsunami has lost momentum, the waters are fading back into the ocean, draining back – and as they dissipate – there we see that same man standing. And we might hear Him say, “It is finished.”

The tsunami of God's anger broke upon Jesus, and He was left standing. The tsunami's force is forever gone for those who trust in Jesus.

It is finished – God was satisfied. For all who would come under this sacrifice, God was thoroughly and completely satisfied. No one claiming the blood of Christ would ever have to fear condemnation, anger, wrath, nor being forsaken by God ever again.

Forever and ever, as you worship Christ, you will worship Him as the one who weathered God's anger for you. Those nail prints will forever remind us – ‘I was shielded from God's Unstoppable Wrath.’ ‘I was hidden in the Rock of Ages, as the ferocious jealousy of God demanded a price I couldn't pay, but Christ paid for me.’

If you do not fear God's anger, there are only two explanations for that: You do so ignorantly, like blind man skipping towards a cliff. Or, you do so gratefully, knowing God's anger was averted by Christ on your behalf. **Lamentations 3:22** ²² **Through** the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not.

Those mercies, those compassions, have a name – Jesus Christ. He is truly our Passover Lamb – the wrath of God – the Unsupportable Fury of God passes over those hid in Christ. If the blood of the Lamb has been applied by faith to the doorposts of your heart, His anger is averted regarding you, and passes over you.

That is why the passage in Nahum adds these words after describing God's anger - Nahum 1:7 *The LORD is good, A stronghold in the day of trouble; And He knows those who trust in Him.*