

CHAPTER 5

"SLOW TO ANGER"

*The LORD passed in front of him and said,
"The LORD, the LORD, a God ... slow to
anger. (Exodus 34:6)*



This chapter will be a wild ride for some people, and introduce ideas they have never before considered. The long and the short of it all is that God doesn't like to punish people. Seriously. He doesn't enjoy watching anyone get their "just desserts." Millions of religious people seem to be missing this because they aren't seeing His true character clearly. So we are going to sift through a lot of neglected biblical data. When all the dust settles, I hope the notion that God is easily irritated and has an itchy trigger finger can be laid to rest, because just as He told Moses, God is "slow to anger."

5.2 TIME FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT

There is a mountain of biblical evidence that flies in the face of what so many of us think about God's anger and wrath. Contrary to popular belief, God is not some temperamental, Zeus-like figure with eyebrows furrowed and lightning bolts in hand. If we examine the biblical evidence closely, we find a very different picture—a God who is impossibly patient, waiting decades and even centuries for sinners to repent, a God who goes to absurd lengths to ensure people DO NOT get what they deserve. As He told the prophet Ezekiel, **"I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked"** (Ezekiel 33:11).

This doesn't mean God is a pushover. His wrath is a reality, but it is a complex subject with a lot of surprising twists and turns. What is actually going on behind the scenes when "God's wrath" manifests isn't what most people think. Are you aware of the fact, for instance, that it usually isn't God Himself who "deals out the blows" during seasons of divine wrath? Read the Scriptures carefully.

In the first place, God actually set up the universe so that a personal agent is often not even necessary during a season of "divine wrath." We could say that the world we live in is a self-correcting machine. It was set up to destroy rebels and fools. Human sinfulness has natural consequences that, if grace doesn't intervene, will inevitably play out. **"When sin has run its course, it brings forth death"** (James 1:15). What we are talking about is called the law of sowing and reaping. **"Whatever a person sows, this is what they will reap"** (Galatians 6:7). Scripture often refers to this self-correcting feature of our universe as "God's wrath," because

God is ultimately the One who made the system. But technically speaking, when a person "reaps what they sow," God doesn't have to do anything at all.

But what about the times when it seems that God is directly involved, when He "stretches out His hand?" When God judges Egypt, it says, "**So I will stretch out My hand and strike Egypt**" (Exodus 3:20). Isaiah the prophet said, "**For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is still stretched out**" (Isaiah 9:12, 17). This is certainly one of the ways to speak of God's wrath, but it is a figure of speech, and figures of speech need to be handled very carefully. It doesn't really tell us much about the mechanics of divine wrath. Just like the figure of speech "sunrise" does not tell us much about the actual mechanics of how the Sun's light intersects the earth. The Sun looks to us like it's rising, but what is really going on? The earth is actually the primary thing in motion, spinning on its axis while orbiting in a much larger circle around the Sun, etc., etc. It's easier to just say, "sunrise" and move on.

The actual fact is that God has hates to see people suffer (even His enemies), and when judgement is absolutely necessary He usually subcontracts it. He typically lets those who enjoy that kind of work, like the godless Philistines, Egyptians, Assyrians, (or even Satan) do the unpleasant tasks. As strange as this sounds, God's "hand" of judgment is usually the destructive work of His enemies. During seasons of devastation, when God "stretches out His hand," He is usually just getting out of the way, a bit like allow a vicious dog out of the kennel. The biblical authors understood how this all works (even if most of us don't). This is why they would write things like, "**Do not turn me over to the desires**

of my enemies" (Psalm 27:12), or "Do not deliver the soul of Your turtledove to the wild beast" (Psalm 74:19). God's enemies can even be called God's rod, because once again, they do the "dirty work." (The biblical authors also knew that these evil "subcontractors" would eventually be judged too, but for a time they were allowed to serve God's greater purpose. "Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger" [Isaiah 10:5; see also Isaiah 33:1]).

God has every right to punish the wicked Himself, and on occasion God's judgment is administered by the righteous, but this is surprisingly rare.¹ The norm seen again and again is that God allows wicked men (and wicked spiritual powers) to deal out the blows.² Why? Because God enjoys seeing people suffer punishment about as much as you would enjoy watching your son or daughter go to a prison camp, or before a firing squad. If we could see "behind the veil" during these seasons of God's anger, what would we find Him doing? Weeping and longing for sinners to come to their senses.

"How can I surrender you, O Israel? ... My heart is in upheaval within Me, all my affections are enflamed" (Hosea 11:8).³

"O that My head were waters, and My eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of My people!" (Jeremiah 9:1).⁴

The fact is that in absolutely every situation where a person deserves punishment, God's real desire is to forgive them and pour out His lovingkindness on them ... like He did for my good friend Mikala.

5.3 MIKALA'S WIPE OUT

Recently a young lady in our church named Mikala returned from an amazing missionary adventure. She went all by herself to a developing country where witchcraft, sexual abuse, and corruption are rampant. Normally our church leadership wouldn't encourage a young person to go on this sort of dangerous solo mission, but we concluded that her case was different. We believed that God had uniquely prepared her, and her report to the church confirmed that we made the right choice.

The powerpoint presentation she gave when she returned blew me away. As she talked us through picture after picture, I thought, *I have never seen a young twenty-something so powerfully used by God.* She was leading the lost to Christ left and right, helping people find healing from horrific trauma. One picture was of a beaming group of teenage girls. They were all victims of sexual abuse who were now experiencing new joy and freedom. In another photo, she had her arm around a radiant, smiling young woman. Mikala explained to the church, *"This is Kisa. She used to be like a New Testament demoniac, running through her village violently attacking people. Jesus set her free, and here she is at her baptism."* ... But let's back up for a minute, because not too long ago Mikala's ministry was not so amazing.

Several years ago Mikala was in a terrible place. She had gone on a similar mission to the exact same country, and that trip just about destroyed her. (She gave me permission to write this.) Like so many young Christians, she went overseas before she was ready. Hoping to “change the world for Jesus,” she was pretty clueless about the darkness she would be facing. Without going into too many details, let’s just say that Satan blindsided her. She not only experienced devastating failures in ministry, she also had a life-altering moral wipeout. When she got home, this previously joyful, upbeat young lady was barely recognizable. It was as if she just wanted to hide in the shadows. She couldn’t even look me in the eye. Mikala was convinced that after what she had done, God had no interest in using her again, ever. She believed she was damaged goods. Unforgivable.

In the midst of her brokenness, Mikala started to meet with my wife, who challenged her to go deeper into the truths of Exodus 34:6, *The Derakim*. The Holy Spirit revealed to her that God was not up in heaven fuming over her recent failure. He was not playing the passive-aggressive game either, telling her to keep her distance. Rather, like the father in Jesus’s parable of The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-24), God was more than willing to forgive her, and yearned for her to run back into His arms.

To make a long story short, Mikala did eventually step out of the shadows and run back into the arms of the Father. She then took quite a bit of time to better prepare herself (something young Christians today would be wise to do). Healed up and equipped, she then went back to the place where Satan had almost wrecked her. Needless to say, this time she was not the one up against the ropes taking the

beating. Mikala was now the one dealing out the blows to the powers of darkness, bringing the message of *The Derakim* to people in desperate need (like Kisa). The fact is that God doesn't want to bring down the hammer on Mikala, or Kisa, or anyone else in this world. This is exactly what God was trying to communicate to us when He said that He is "*slow to anger*."

5.4 GOD'S GREATEST ACT OF JUDGMENT

To jump right into the deep end, let's start with the ultimate example of God's anger and wrath in human history—the cross. At the cross, all the punishment deserved by the human race was placed upon Jesus Christ. **"He is the satisfaction for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for those of the whole world"** (1 John 2:2; also see Hebrews 7:27). He drank the full cup of divine wrath for all of humanity for all time. **"He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The punishment bringing us peace fell upon Him"** (Isaiah 53:5). The result of this momentous event is that the penalty for all sin is paid, and everyone who believes this receives pardon from God. This is, of course, "the good news," aka "the gospel" (see 1 Corinthians 15:1-4). Now let's probe into the subject of God's anger by looking a little closer at what actually took place at the cross.⁵

In the first place, what is God the Father technically doing as punishment is inflicted upon Jesus? Is the Father mocking and beating Jesus, pressing the crown of thorns on His head, tearing the flesh from him with a bone and glass-tipped whip? He is doing nothing of the sort. In this ultimate case

of divine anger/wrath, God the Father has withdrawn in grief, and given the Son over to His enemies. According to Scripture, God's wrath at the cross is actually carried out by those who hate God. The Gospel of Matthew tells us, **"The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men; and they will kill Him"** (17:22). Luke is even more specific and tells us that these men are "sinners"—**"The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners"** (24:7; also see Acts 2:23). Technically speaking, then, we could say that God the Father is doing nothing at all ... but stepping aside. Have you ever thought about God's anger and wrath in this way? This is how the cross seems to be understood by Jesus Himself. This is why He quotes the prophecy of Psalm 22, **"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"**(Matthew 27:46).

How prevalent is this idea in Scripture, God withdrawing during seasons of judgment? It's everywhere. He steps back and lets the wicked (like the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Philistines, or even Satan himself) carry out His judgment. Again, we could say that God subcontracts out divine judgment because He doesn't want to do it. It's necessary, but God puts it off as long as possible. And the norm is that when it's absolutely necessary, with a broken heart God lets someone else do it.

O God, why have You rejected us forever?
Why does Your anger smoke against the
sheep of Your pasture? ... The enemy has
damaged everything within the sanctuary.

**Your adversaries have roared in the midst of
Your meeting place. (Psalm 74:1-2)**

Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against His people, and He abhorred His inheritance. Then He gave them into the hand of the nations, and those who hated them ruled over them. Their enemies also oppressed them and they were subdued under their hand. Many times He would deliver them; however, they were rebellious in their counsel and so sank down in their iniquity. (106:40-43)

This is just one of the many surprising twists related to divine anger/wrath in the Bible. Before pressing further into the idea of God “subcontracting” wrath, however, let's revisit the idea that often God's wrath does not involve any personal agent at all.

5.5 GOD'S SELF-CORRECTING SYSTEM

In many situations that the Bible refers to as God's "anger" or "wrath," God doesn't even need an agent (like Egypt, or Assyria) to serve as His rod. Why? Because God made the universe to be self-correcting. All other contingencies aside, good behavior will naturally result in blessings, and sinful behavior will naturally result in curses. As was already said, this is known as the principle of sowing and reaping. Our actions are like little seeds that bring inevitable consequences.

"Don't be deceived ... whatever a person sows, this he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7).⁶

(Of course, God's universe is a complex machine, and this is not the only principle at work, but it is certainly a major one. In the book of Job, one of his major errors was to oversimplify the universe, assuming that everything could be understood with reference to only one principle. We shouldn't make the same mistake.⁷)

The book of Proverbs has the principle of sowing and reaping running through it from start to finish. For those who discover God's wisdom (personified throughout the book as a woman), and live their lives accordingly to "her" instruction, good things will naturally flow to them. **"Long life is in her right hand; In her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are peace."** (Proverbs 3:16-17). On the other hand, those who spurn wisdom and choose to indulge in sin, disaster will eventually overtake them. Here is a harsh warning to fools who spurn the suggestion of "lady wisdom."

Because I called and you refused, I stretched out my hand and no one paid attention; and you neglected all my counsel and did not want my reproof; I will also laugh at your disaster; I will mock when your dread comes, when your dread comes like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. (Proverbs 1:24-27)

This self-correcting aspect of God's universe is what the apostle Paul is referring to in one of the lengthiest discussions of God's wrath in the New Testament. Paul never speaks about any personal agent bringing pain and suffering to the guilty. He only mentions the fact that God steps aside, giving people over to their sin and letting them experience the natural consequences:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of people who suppress the truth in unrighteousness ... Therefore God gave them up to vile impurity in the lusts of their hearts, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them ... For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions ... receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. (Romans 1:18-24)

Everyone knows about "sowing and reaping" by experience, to one degree or another. At some point we all acted selfishly, lied, stole, slandered, etc., and the consequences came back on us like a hurricane. There was no need for God to let loose the Egyptians, Babylonians, or Philistines on us. The painful fruit of our own actions were brutal reminders of how stupid and selfish they were. We lost friends, our reputation, a job, our health, a house, or a spouse. The Bible talks about this kind of divine wrath frequently. God isn't personally pounding on us during these times, nor has He let His enemies loose on us. We bring it on naturally. **"His mischief will return**

upon his own head, and his violence will come down on his own pate." (Psalm 7:16)

It should be noted that sometimes it doesn't seem like the law of sowing and reaping is working (emphasis on "seem"). The righteous do suffer at times, and at other times it looks like the wicked are getting off Scot free. Several passages in the Bible are complaints by those who think there has been some sort of cosmic malfunction on this point (like Psalm 37 and 73). All we will note here is that, as we said above, "reaping and sowing" is not the only thing going on in God's universe. We might say, It's not the only cog in the machine.

What are some of the other cogs? Well, among other things, there are also the millions of freewill agents whose existence overlap with mine. This means they can bring pain and suffering into my life that I didn't cause. On the positive side there is also divine grace, which is continually being infused into the system so that we are not all wiped out too quickly (Psalm 130:3-4). This all gets pretty complex, but the only point we are trying to make here is that, as a rule, the universe itself works against you if you are evil. This is often called "God's anger" or "God's wrath." In these cases, God Himself doesn't need to do anything at all ... except let the universe roll. Now we can move on to those times when a personal agent is involved in divine wrath. As a rule, God isn't directly involved in these situations, either.

5.6 WHEN GOD'S ENEMIES RUSH IN

If you want to discover the main themes of Israel's religion, study her worship songs. The book of Psalms is a veritable

classroom for understanding how the biblical authors understood the mechanics of God's anger and wrath. The norm is that God withdraws and His enemies rush in. Psalm 6, for example, is a repentant sinner's plea for God to avert His anger.⁸

O Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger, or chasten me in Your wrath. Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am wasting away. Heal me, O Lord, for my bones are dismayed and my soul is greatly dismayed; But You, Lord—how long? Return, Lord, rescue my soul. Save me because of Your lovingkindness. For there is no mention of You in death; In Sheol who will give You thanks? I am weary with my sighing; Every night I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with my tears. My eye has wasted away with grief; It has become old because of all my adversaries. Depart from me, all you who do iniquity, for the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping. The Lord has heard my supplication. The Lord receives my prayer. All my enemies will be ashamed and greatly dismayed; They shall turn back, they will suddenly be ashamed.

How, very specifically, does this sinner believe this prayer will be answered? How will God's "anger" be turned away? The answer is highlighted above. Like so many other Psalms, there is a reference to God's enemies. "**All my enemies will**

be ashamed and greatly dismayed; They shall turn back, they will suddenly be ashamed." (v. 10) The very next Psalm also points to this understanding of divine wrath. The psalmist is well aware of God's normal method of chastening the unrepentant sinner.

Lord my God, if I have done this, if there is injustice in my hands, if I have rewarded evil to my friend, or have plundered him who without cause was my enemy, let the enemy pursue my soul and overtake it; and let him trample my life down to the ground and lay my glory in the dust. (Psalm 7:3-5)

The psalmists are singing about a theme that is found frequently throughout the narrative sections of Scripture. When God's patience came to an end with the northern kingdom of Israel, for instance, the Scriptures tell us,

And the LORD rejected all the descendants of Israel and afflicted them and gave them into the hand of plunderers, until he had cast them out of His sight. (2 Kings 17:20)

This divine strategy is so well-known among Israel's prophets, that at times they would even complain about it. Habakkuk, for instance, seems to think its a little unfair that sometimes the "rod" of discipline is more wicked than the nation being punished.

**You, O Lord, have appointed them to judge;
And You, O Rock, have established them
to correct?... Why are You silent when the
wicked swallow up those more righteous
than they? (Habakkuk 1:12-13)**

This type of divine "subcontracting" is found from Genesis to Revelation, and it is exactly what we see at the cross. Stated plainly—"God's hand" in the Bible is often not technically "His hand." It's usually His enemy's hand.

5.7 WHEN "GOD'S HAND" IS NOT "GOD'S HAND"

God's anger and wrath is often referred to in Scripture as God's hand. **"His anger is not turned away, His hand is still stretched out."** (Isaiah 9:12; 17; 21) To those unfamiliar with certain figures of speech in the Bible, this might seem to indicate that God is reaching down and thumping on someone. On the contrary, this is not a literal explanation of what is going on at all. This is just another example of what scholars refer to as "the language of appearance" or "the language of experience." It's how things look and feel from a limited human perspective, but isn't a technical, scientific explanation of things. Again, if you scrutinize the finer details of a passage, "God's hand" is typically some wicked enemy of God who is serving as a "rod" of discipline. This figurative use of "the hand of God" comes to serve as a default way to speak of calamity and judgment.⁹ Psalm 38, for instance, begins,

O Lord, rebuke me not in Your wrath, and chasten me not in Your burning anger. For Your arrows have sunk deep into me, and Your hand has pressed down on me.

The Psalm then goes on to clarify the mechanics of God's wrath. What is actually, technically, going on?

For I am ready to fall, and my sorrow is always before me. For I confess my iniquity; I am full of anxiety because of my sin. And my enemies are vigorous and strong, and many are those who hate me for no reason. (vv.15-19)

The language of appearance, or experience is common to all human cultures. On the evening news tonight, for example, you may hear that the sun will rise at 6:43 a.m. tomorrow. Anyone who has even dabbled in astronomy knows that the sun does not technically “rise” and “set.” This is what the sun does from our limited vantage point. In a similar way, the figure of speech “God stretched out His hand” is a useful way to refer to devastation, but is not at all an attempt to explain the mechanics of what is going on. We don’t call our local newscaster a liar for speaking about *the sun rise*, and we should not view this sort of biblical language as untrue. It is true and useful if we understand how the words are being used. It is not the whole story, but it gives people with

limited theological understanding a way to make sense of their world, and to fear the consequences of sin.

If we don't allow for this sort of thing in Scripture and want to hyper-literalize, things get pretty murky. Read the following passage from Judges, at try to figure out just whose "hand" is doing what. It ends up looking like God fights against His own "hand" (?).

They turned away from the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtaroath. And the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies around them, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies. Wherever they went, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil . . . Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them. (Judges 2:13-16)

So, whose hand is it? Read the above passage carefully. God's hand and the enemies hand refer to the same thing. As we have already said, God's anger, and His hand, are clearly figurative ways of saying that God is allowing His enemies to bring pain and suffering on stubborn, rebellious people.

5.8 GOD'S HAND AND SATAN'S HAND

Job is considered by many scholars to be the oldest book in our Bible. This ancient poem has a lot to say about the spiritual mechanics of mayhem, and more importantly tells us what is going on behind the scenes when God "stretches out His hand." The book begins with wave after wave of calamity hitting the poor hapless man, Job—the loss of his wealth, the death of children. These disasters are all referred to as God's hand, but clearly they are not the result of God's direct action. Satan makes a very specific request of God,

Stretch out Your hand now and strike all that he has; and he will surely curse You to Your face.” And the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your hand . . .
(Job 1:11-12)

Did you catch that? Satan says, "Stretch out Your hand" to God, and God says in essence, "Okay, Satan. Do what you want." Even Satan understands how this figure of speech works. Anyone who doubts that this is what is going on here just needs to keep reading. Satan goes out on his first mission of destruction and wreaks havoc on Job's family and fortune. Job doesn't buckle, so the destroyer wants another shot. He uses the exact same figure of speech again—"stretch out Your hand" (and God doesn't bother to correct him).

Stretch forth Your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse You to Your face. So the LORD said to Satan, Behold, he is in your hand, only spare his life.

Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and smote Job with raw wounds from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. (Job 2:5-7)

So once again, whose *hand* is it? Who is really doing the damage? Anyone who has read the story knows that Satan is the one who is attacking poor Job, ravaging his property, killing his children, and smiting him with oozing boils. Did God directly carry out the dirty deeds? No. Like so many other places in the Bible, this has absolutely nothing to do with God's direct action. This glimpse behind the spiritual veil is illuminating, because the evils which befall Job clearly reflect Satan's character, not God's, but in the language of the Old Testament, they can be referred to as God "stretching out His hand."

It's also very helpful to note that in the Old Testament, only on extremely rare occasions do biblical authors attribute to Satan the things so typical of him in the New Testament, like temptation, infirmity, sickness, insanity, and death. Why? Because they just don't know that much about him yet. The simple explanation is found in a theological concept called *progressive revelation*. This means that, as a general rule, earlier revelation is less clear and undeveloped than later revelation. Very specifically, the Old Testament is often hazy on issues that are stated with crystal clarity in the New Testament. Consider, for example, doctrines like the Trinity, Jesus Christ's divinity, the distinct personality of the Holy Spirit, the existence of heaven and hell, and the resurrection, to name just a handful.

It is only the New Testament that really brings such things into clear focus. In fact, Satan is mentioned by name in only a few accounts in the Old Testament (1 Chronicles 21:1; Job 1 & 2; Zechariah 3:1-2), in spite of the fact that the Old Testament is several times longer than the New Testament. It is not until the season of God's clearest revelation, when Jesus Christ comes onto the scene, that we hear unambiguously that Satan and his demons are directly behind so much of the mayhem in our world. From an Old Testament perspective, what they would say is, "God stretched out His hand." What the actual fact is, however, is that God the Father is exactly like Jesus.

5.9 WHAT DO THE WICKED SEE?

If God the Father is really just like Jesus, what about all those terrifying descriptions of God in the Old Testament, like Psalm 18?

Then the earth shook and quaked, and the foundations of the mountains were trembling, and were shaken because He was angry. Smoke went up out of His nostrils, and fire from His mouth devoured. Coals were kindled by it. He also bowed the heavens and came down. With thick darkness under His feet, He rode upon a cherub and flew, and He sped upon the wings of the wind. He made darkness His hiding place, His pavilion around Him, darkness of waters, thick clouds of the skies. From the brightness be-

fore Him passed His thick clouds, hailstones, and coals of fire. The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered His voice—hailstones and coals of fire. He sent out His arrows and scattered them, and lightning flashes in abundance and routed them.

First, let's just state the obvious. God will only appear glorious and wonderful ("compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, etc.") to the righteous, like Moses. Why? Because only they have been given that privileged access to "know His ways." The wicked have not been given this privileged access. This means that when they think about God, they are *de facto* seeing something else. What do they see? Probably something like that fire-breathing beast in Psalm 18. To make sense of all this, pay careful attention to what is said a little later in this Psalm. The author goes on to make a fascinating distinction—between how the faithful will see God, and how God's enemies will see Him. Only to the *hesed*-like, does God reveal Himself to be *hesed*-like.¹⁰

To a person of kindness (*hasid*), You appear kind. To a person of purity, You appear pure. To a person who is blameless, You appear blameless. But to a corrupt person, You appear twisted. (Psalm 18:25-26)

Quite literally, it tells us that two people can have radically different visions of God in their mind. It's only the humble,

the holy, the spiritually hungry who get to see His glory. The Old Testament calls this person a *hasid* (much more on this in chapter 6). Only the *hasid* gets to see God as He really is. God is hidden from everyone else. This idea is expressed in a lot of different ways in both the Old and New Testament. **"The secret of the LORD is for those who fear Him"** (Psalm 25:14). **"Only the upright will see His face"** (Psalm 11:7). In the New Testament Jesus affirms this as well: **"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God"** (Matthew 5:8). So what are the wicked seeing? Maybe they see something like this description of God by the angry atheist Richard Dawkins.

The God of the Old Testament is ... jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.¹¹

The fourth line in Psalm 18 tells us that to those who are twisted, God appears twisted. The word here is related to the Hebrew word *patal*, and is literally used for the "twisting" together of strands of a cord or rope; terms derived from *patal* can also refer to someone who is morally "twisted." Could this be why the rebellious in Israel were terrified to look on God. **"All the people ... said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen, but don't let God speak to us or we will die.'"** (Exodus 20:18-20). But Moses (and all the rest of the righteous in Scripture) can't wait to get into

His presence. **"Better is one day in your courts than 1000 elsewhere"** (Psalm 84:10). Could this be why, even today, so many people think that the Old Testament God is some sort of monster? God is not twisted. He only looks that way to those who are twisted.

And just one more thing. In previous chapters we talked about "strongholds" in the mind that need to come down if we are ever going to know God's ways. The problem is not just that millions of people are blind to the reality of God's kindness. Their condition is exacerbated by the fact that their theology has also been sabotaged by Satanic lies. The very last thing the hosts of hell want you to know is that God the Father functions exactly like Jesus Christ. In Paul's words, the glory of God is revealed in the face of Christ.

In whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ... For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:4,6)

5.10 WHEN PROPHETS TALK TOUGH

The prophets of God were all in on an amazing little secret. Behind the severest words of divine judgment, God's heart

of lovingkindness was hiding. The fact is that God loves absolutely everyone with an everlasting love, even His enemies (Matthew 5:43-48).¹² When God sends a tough-talking prophet, like Jonah or Elijah, His hope is that the fiery language will break the spell that Satan and sin has over the minds of the wicked ... so He can lavish them with lovingkindness. The prophets were all crystal clear on this. God didn't really want to punish Israel, or any other nation for that matter. The angry-sounding message is supposed to work like a "slap" that brings the wicked to their senses. In Exodus 32 God may have said, **"Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them"** (Exodus 32:10), but He was really hoping to forgive and bless. Moses was just learning this, but the later prophets had 20/20 hindsight. At these times of prophetic denunciation, God's enemies might be "seeing" a monster, but behind the terrifying message was the compassionate God described in *The Derakim*.

"Perhaps they will listen and everyone will turn from his evil way, that I may turn from the calamity which I am planning to do to them because of the evil of their deeds." (Jeremiah 26:3)

Jonah, one of the most well-known biblical prophets, gives us a clear examples of how this all works. He was called to go and cry out against Israel's archenemy Assyria. His sermon was short and severe—"In forty days Nineveh will be annihilated" (Jonah 4:4). We all know the story. Instead of fulfilling his assignment, Jonah gets in a boat and heads

in the opposite direction, for Tarshish (near modern-day Spain). Contrary to popular opinion, Jonah did not flee to the far reaches of the civilized world because he was afraid to be a missionary (as generations of misinformed Sunday School children have been taught). Jonah fled because he understood God's methods. God was actually reaching out in love, hoping that the Ninevites would repent ... and Jonah didn't want them to receive God's mercy.

Like all true prophets, Jonah knew that God's mind-blowing lovingkindness, *The Derakim*, was hiding behind the tough prophetic word. He was well-aware of God's modus operandi. God does not really want Nineveh to be destroyed in forty days, and the prophetic rebuke can be a highly effective way to trigger repentance. It certainly worked for the Ninevites.

**Then the people of Nineveh believed in God;
and they called a fast and put on sackcloth
from the greatest to the least of them . . .
When God saw their deeds, that they had
turned from their wicked way, then God
turned from the disaster which He had de-
clared He would bring upon them, and He
did not do it. (Jonah 3:5, 10)**

The book of Jonah, however, is one of the strangest books in the Bible, because the prophet does not share God's affections for the people. Jonah hated them, and wanted to see them burn. (Yikes!) How can we be absolutely sure this is what is going on? Listen to Jonah's complaint in the end of

the book, after God gets His way, and spares Nineveh. (Note how Jonah quotes *The Derakim*.)

But this greatly displeased Jonah, and he was angry. And he prayed and said to Yahweh, "Please Yahweh, was this not what I said while I remained in my country? So, in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, because I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness, and one who turns away from bringing disaster. (Jonah 4:1-3)

When people absolutely insist on rejecting God's lovingkindness, He may reluctantly give them over to wrath but He can't stand it. Here is another one of those peaks behind the veil that shows what is really going on in the heart of God during seasons of judgment:

My soul, My soul! I am in anguish! Oh, my heart! My heart is pounding within Me. I cannot be silent, because you have heard, O my soul, The sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war. Disaster on disaster is proclaimed. For the whole land is devastated ... For My people are foolish. They do not know Me (Jeremiah 4:19-22)

Why did God wait about a century before sending the flood in Noah's day, in spite of the fact that **"every intent and thought of their heart was only evil continually"** (Genesis 6:5)? Why did He allow the idolatrous Northern Kingdom of Israel, which had 19 evil kings in a row, to remain for almost 200 years—while they were doing horrific things like human sacrifices? Why did He allow the Southern Kingdom of Judah, which in the end became even more wicked than Israel, to go on for over 300 years? For that matter, why are you here reading this book, and why am I here writing it after all we have done in violation of God's ways? The answer: He is **"compassionate and gracious, and slow to anger."**

5.11 GOD'S WRATH IN JESUS'S MINISTRY

The biblical evidence for all of this is simply overwhelming, but we have still not touched on the strongest argument of all. When God put on skin and walked among us, what did He look like? Jesus came into the world to show us what the Father was like—to flesh out the Father's *modus operandi*. **"He who has seen Me has seen the Father"** (John 14:9). He is the final Word on God's character, nature, and ways. Jesus was not about killing, smiting, or sending plagues. As He once told His disciples, **"The Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them."** (Luke 9:55-56).

What is Jesus's interpretation of divine wrath? We don't have to guess. We can watch Him in the pages of Scripture, weeping at a distance and declaring that God's enemies are coming in to dole out judgment on the rebellious city of Jerusalem. Jesus does not pick up a sword and level

Jerusalem Himself. The job is subcontracted to the godless Romans.

And when He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, "If you had known in this day, even you, things which make for peace. But now they have been hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation." (Luke 19:41-44)

Anyone who takes the time to read the historic account of this event by the historian Josephus, will understand better why Jesus was weeping.¹³ Sinners being punished has always broken God's heart. **"How can I surrender you, O Israel . . . My heart is churning within Me. All my affections are ablaze."** (Hosea 11:8) In light of all the biblical evidence, we all need to think long and hard about what we attribute directly to God. As strange as this may sound, Satan is actually the one manifesting his will and ways during seasons of "God's anger."

Jesus and His apostles should be the ones to clarify all these sorts of issues for us. Jesus was not at all vague about what spiritual power is directly behind sickness, suffering, insanity, death, and destruction—in His mind it was Satan. Just as

you call a plumber when you need your sewer line fixed, Satan is the expert in calamity. He is like a rabid dog, frothing at the mouth and ready to destroy. When we persist in our sins, eventually he is let loose. In the Old Testament, such things may be called "the hand of God," but when Jesus casts out demons, heals the sick, or rebukes a storm, He makes it all clear—He is battling Satan (not His Father). As the Gospels tell us, **"A house divided cannot stand"** (Matthew 12:25). If God is equally responsible for afflicting and curing, saving and destroying, would this not make Him the ultimate "house divided?" A psychologist might conclude that He has some sort of cosmic split personality disorder. No. He is the God of *The Derakim*, and He is "slow to anger."

5.12 BALANCING SCRIPTURE WITH SCRIPTURE

In the very beginning of human history, Satan got Eve to fall into sin by distorting God's words. **"Did God really say ... ?"** (Genesis 3:1). Satan later tried the exact same trick on Jesus, but the Son of God would have none of it. Jesus corrects Satan's distortion of God's words with "It is written." Satan tries to mis-use Psalm 91—**"He will give His angels charge concerning you,"** so Jesus checks him with Deuteronomy 6:16, **"Do not put the Lord Your God to the test"** (See Matthew 4:5-7; Luke 4:9-12). Jesus's counter move sent a frustrated Satan scurrying back into the shadows. We need to learn to handle the Word of God a lot more like Jesus, and a lot less like Eve.

Satan's strategies haven't changed much over the centuries, and distorting God's word is still one of his favorite ways to

snare us. Millions of people regularly fall for this time-tested trick of twisting and distorting God's Word. This often happens when we get locked onto one little word or phrase in the Bible, like those occasions that "God stretches out His hand." We read them without balancing them out with the dozens of other passages that would nuance our understanding. The result is a distorted theology—a vision of God the Father that does not look at all like Jesus.

I am not going to belabor the point here, but the fact is that there are a whole bunch of verses that are not technical statements about the inner mechanics of God. They are true, but we need to read and understand them properly. They may be describing how a person feels when they are lacking spiritual clarity. God, for example, does not forget about us. "**How long, LORD, will You forget about me forever?**" (Psalm 13:1). God is not blind. "**Open Your eyes**" (Daniel 9:18). Nor is He deaf. "**If I treasure sin in my heart, He will not hear me**" (Psalm 66:18). He never falls asleep on the job either. "**Then Yahweh awoke as from sleep, like a warrior overcome by wine**" (Psalm 78:65). The point of many such expressions is to describe how things can seem from our very limited human perspective. (This happened to me this morning before I sat down to write. I was praying about a couple of people who really needed God's help. I said, "God, why are You not listening.") Again, this is the language of human experience. It truly expresses how we feel, how things seem, but it says little or nothing about what was technically going on in the realm of God.

All this is also true during times of calamity and divine judgment. When people are experiencing things like "**fire and brimstone and burning wind**" (Psalm 11:6), this may

be referred to as the wrath, or even the hatred of God (Psalm 11:5). However, it doesn't necessarily tell us anything about what is going on in the heart and mind of God. In addition, God may talk tough through His prophets, and He may "look" terrible to the wicked ... but He is the God of *The Derakim*, the God revealed in Jesus. He is hoping they repent, so they can come to know His ways too.

5.13 A REBUKE FROM JESUS

Jesus and His disciples James and John were passing through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem. Brothers James and John ran on ahead to inquire about lodging for the night. The Samaritans refused them outright in what we might call an act of reverse discrimination. The Samaritans knew that the Jews hated them, and it wasn't every day that the Samaritans got to give their "*holier than thou*" enemies a taste of their own medicine. They basically told Jesus and His weary companions, "Just keep on walking" (Luke 9:51-56).

Here is an interesting little detail you should know about brothers James and John. They were nicknamed "**the Sons of Thunder**" (Mark 3:17). Bible scholars have suggested that this nickname was given to them because they were hotheads. Their over-the-top response to the Samaritans here certainly supports this interpretation. Outraged, James and John made a startling request of Jesus. "**Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven, to fall and consume them?**" (Luke 9:54). The Sons of Thunder seemed to think that, like them, Jesus would relish the thought of seeing a smoking crater where that disrespectful Samaritan village sat. They made a terrible mistake.

Jesus's response must have hit James and John like a stinging slap in the face. He not only rejected their suggestion to punish their enemies, but indicated that the idea was Satanic. **"But He turned and rebuked them and said, 'You do not know what kind of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them'"** (vv. 55-56). What is Jesus's point? Very unlike the Sons of Thunder, He and His Father are not hotheads. The disciples' request revealed that they (like so many of us) were completely out of touch with the heart of God.

"But wait just a minute," the young Bible student might say. "Didn't God rain down fire and brimstone on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and ravage the nation of Egypt with plague after plague after plague, and destroy the whole earth with a flood in Noah's day?" Yes, sort of, but there is more ... a lot more to the story. The subject of God's anger is not as black and white as many people assume. We need the help of God's Holy Spirit to parse it all out properly. By looking to the broader testimony of Scripture, and especially at the life of Jesus, we can avoid making the same mistake as the Sons of Thunder. God doesn't want to punish anyone—the Samaritans, the Ninevites, the Israelites, Mikala, Kisa, you, or me. He is "slow to anger." And, His greatest desire for us is that we become just like Him.

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1. The book of Judges, when God Israel is taking possession of the Promised Land, is an example of this. However, this is clearly an exception, and not the rule.

2. These wicked forces will also be judged in due time.
"Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger" (Isaiah 10:5; see also Isaiah 33:1).
3. Of course, Jesus is the ultimate explanation of the Father and is also a powerful case in point here. What does Jesus do just prior to "giving over" Jerusalem to judgment? He weeps and laments (Luke 19:41-44).
4. Some commentators say that the prophet Jeremiah is speaking here, but this whole section (which flows from the previous chapter) tells us over and over that the One speaking is the LORD. "'They bend their tongue like their bow. Lies prevail, and not truth in the land. For they proceed from evil to evil and they do not know Me,'" declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 9:3)
5. There has been a revolt in recent years against the idea that God the Father punished Jesus for the sins of humanity (the vicarious substitutionary atonement). A common argument is that it is wholly inconsistent with the idea of God as the kind, compassionate Father (tantamount to cosmic child abuse). This only holds if God the Father Himself deals out the blows. If wrath is a matter of "being given over" to the wicked, the charge is largely averted. For a discussion of this subject, see *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, eds. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).
6. If left unchecked, sinful behaviors result in death.
"When sin has run its course, it results in death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers" (James 1:15-16).

7. Job's primary complaint was that since he was such a moral person, he shouldn't be suffering. One of God's correctives was to inform Job that his theological perspective was paper thin, and therefore just flat wrong. "Who is this who obscures counsel with ignorant words?" (Job 42:3)
8. This Psalm is one of seven traditionally called "penitential psalms" (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143), because they focus on a sinner turning back to God in the midst of divine chastening. The theme of wicked enemies as God's instrument is frequent (6:10, 38:19, 102:8, 143:3, 6, 12).
9. For every one of them is godless and an evildoer, and every mouth is speaking foolishness. In all this His anger does not turn away, and His hand is still stretched out . . . Together they are against Judah. In all this His anger does not turn away, and His hand is still stretched out. . . Nothing is left but to crouch among the captives or fall among the slain. In all this His anger does not turn away, and His hand is still stretched out. (Isaiah 9:17-10:4)
10. In Psalm 18 this is indicated by a very rare reflexive form of the verb *hasad*, which means to show oneself to have hesed.
11. Richard Dawkins, *The God Dillusion* (2006), p. 31.
12. You have heard it said, "You should love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may

be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For He makes His sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. But if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax collectors do that? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Don't even the Gentiles do that? Therefore you are to be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.

13. Josephus says, "What I have to recount is an act unparalleled in the history of either the Greeks or the barbarians, and as horrible to relate as it is incredible to hear?" Josephus, Wars of The Jews,