

## 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)



**T**he wrath of God is a reality, but it is a complex topic with a lot of surprising twists and turns. This chapter will be a wild ride, and introduce ideas you may have never considered before. Ultimately, the biblical testimony is quite consistent, and once again Jesus Christ is the final word on the subject. The long and the short of it is that God has an aversion to wrath. He doesn't want to punish anyone.

The New Testament tells us pretty plainly, "**He is patient toward you, not wanting any to perish**" (2 Peter 3:9). God's message in the Old Testament is exactly the same. "**I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked**" (Ezekiel 33:11). Millions of people are completely missing this. Why? They

aren't seeing God as He described Himself in *The Derakim*. So we are going to sift through a lot of neglected biblical data. When all the dust settles, what we will find is a God who is not only impossibly patient, but also a God who is willing to go to outrageous lengths so that you and I don't get what we deserve. **"God loved the world so much that He gave His only begotten Son"** (John 3:16). This is what God was telling us when He described Himself as **"slow to anger."**

## 5.2 TIME FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT

I am amazed at all the biblical data about divine wrath that so many people seem to be overlooking. In the first place, God Himself is usually not directly involved during seasons of "divine wrath." He created our world to be self-correcting. It's a bit like our physical bodies with their immune systems. Most of our negative health issues get sorted without any kind of outside help. Our world was set up in a similar way. It's like it has its own sort of immune system, which works against the wicked and will eventually flush them out. Sinful actions have natural consequences that make life increasingly miserable, and (if grace doesn't intervene) sinful behavior will eventually end you. **"When sin has run its course, it will bring 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 the One who made the system. But technically speaking, in these situations God doesn't have to do anything at all. As Paul says repeatedly in the first chapter of the book of Romans, all He has to do is get out of the way.<sup>1</sup>

But what about those times when there is a direct divine intervention, like all those occasions when the Bible says God "stretches out His hand"? **"For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is still stretched out"** (Isaiah 9:12,17). Consider one of the most well-known seasons of judgment in the Bible, the ten plagues that ravaged ancient Egypt—the frogs, the flies, the boils, the locusts, etc. This is what God Himself said before it all went down, **"So I will stretch out My hand and strike Egypt"** (Exodus 3:20).<sup>2</sup> That sounds pretty "cut and dried," as they say. It's not.

The fact is that the phrase "God stretched out His hand" doesn't tell us much about the actual, literal mechanics of divine wrath. It's a figure of speech that points to how things appear from our human perspective. A whole lot of evidence to support this will be presented below. It's sort of like the figure of speech "sunrise"—it doesn't tell us much about the mechanics of how the Sun's light intersects the earth. From our human point of view, it looks like one thing, but the reality is quite a bit more complex. Any attentive fourth grader knows that, technically speaking, the Sun doesn't rise. The Earth spins on its axis while orbiting its light source, and as a result we experience day and night. All educated people understand this, but we still all say "sunrise." That's how figures of speech work. When God's enemies experience things like **"fire and brimstone and burning wind"** (Psalm 11:6), this can be called the hand of God, the anger of God, or even the hatred of God (Psalm 11:5). But this isn't a technical description of what is going on.

If you want to get technical about it, when the Bible says that God "stretches out His hand," what He is usually doing is allowing some wicked power to impose their will in a

situation. Check this out for yourself. As a rule, God gives the unpleasant tasks we associate with "divine anger" to some godless agent, like the Philistines, Egyptians, Assyrians, Romans, or even Satan himself. Because of this, we might say that God subcontracts divine wrath. He does this for the same reason a person subcontracts a plumber to deal with a backed-up sewer—they don't want to do the job. God lets those who enjoy the pillaging, plundering, and destroying to do the pillaging, plundering, and destroying. So as strange as this may sound to most people, "God's hand" of judgment is usually the destructive work of His enemies. God's enemies can also be called "God's rod," because once again, they are the ones doing the unpleasant work. **"Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger"** (Isaiah 10:5). These evil "subcontractors" will eventually be judged too,<sup>3</sup> but for a time they serve God's greater purpose. The biblical authors understood how all this 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).

Here is the fact. God enjoys seeing people suffer punishment about as much as you would enjoy watching your own son or daughter go before a firing squad. I am not denying that God can experience the emotion of anger, but when the Bible gives us a peek "behind the veil" during seasons of His wrath, what is He usually doing? Answer: grieving, lamenting, and even weeping. The ultimate paradigm of this is seen in Jesus, when He weeps over Jerusalem while pronouncing judgment (Luke 19:41-44). Just like a loving parent may get angry at times, their deepest desire is that the prodigal come to their senses and run home.

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

"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).<sup>4</sup>

In absolutely every situation where a person deserves punishment, God's deepest desire is that they wake up and repent. Why? So that He can do what He does best—lavish His lovingkindness on them ... like He did for my good friend Mikala.

### 5.3 MIKALA'S WIPEOUT

A young lady in our church named Mikala recently 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 blew me away. I was amazed. 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 Mercy. 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 earlier, 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 *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 Mercy). The fact is that God doesn't want to bring down the hammer on Mikala, or Mercy, 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 WRATH

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. It was here that all the punishment deserved by the human race was placed upon Jesus Christ. **"He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The punishment bringing us peace fell upon Him"** (Isaiah 53:5). He drank the full cup of divine wrath for all of humanity for all time. **"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). 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, the ultimate demonstration of the anger and wrath of God.<sup>5</sup>

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 onto 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, 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"** (17:22-23). 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; see also Acts 2:23). Technically speaking, then, we could say that God the Father is doing nothing at all ... but stepping aside. Do most people in the world think 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 abandoned 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) 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  
ruined everything in the sanctuary. Your ad-  
versaries have roared in the middle of Your  
meeting place. (Psalm 74:1-4)**

**So the LORD's anger was kindled against  
His people, and He abhorred His inheri-  
tance. Then He gave them into the hand  
of the nations, and those who hated them  
ruled over them. Their enemies also op-  
pressed them and they were brought into  
subjection under their hand. Many times He  
would deliver them, but they were rebellious  
in their counsel and they sank down into  
their sins. (Psalm 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 God's wrath often does not involve any personal agent at all.

## 5.5 THE COSMIC IMMUNE 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). God's universe is a complex machine and this is not the only principle at work, but it is certainly a major one.<sup>6</sup>

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, Philistines, or Satan. The painful fruits 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. In such cases, God doesn't need to let the dogs loose. We bring the pain and suffering on ourselves. **"His mischief returns upon his own head, and his violence comes down on his own pate"** (Psalm 7:16).

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), 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). But for those who spurn wisdom and choose to indulge in sin, disaster will eventually overtake them. They will ultimately get driven out of the system like an infection gets driven out of our bodies. Here is a harsh warning to fools who reject the counsel of "lady wisdom."

**Because I called and you refused, I stretched out my hand and no one paid any attention; and you neglected all my counsel and didn't 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 misery and pain 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. In this section, 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:

**God's wrath is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of people who suppress the truth in unrighteous-**

ness ... 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 punishment their error deserves. (Romans 1:18-27)

We need to keep reiterating the fact, however, that "reaping and sowing" is not the only thing going on in God's universe. We could say it's not the only cog in the machine. In fact, several passages in the Bible are complaints by God's people to the effect that God's cosmic immune system seems to be malfunctioning—why do the righteous suffer, and the wicked prosper? (see, e.g., Psalm 37 and 73). What is going on? One of the main things getting in the way of immediate justice is the fact that divine grace is continually being infused into the system. If this didn't happen, we would all be wiped out (Psalm 130:3-4). What are some of the other cogs in the machine? Billions of freewill agents (human and angelic) whose existence overlaps with mine. The consequences of their sin can bring pain and suffering that I didn't cause. All this gets really complex (and merits a complete book). The only point being made here is that the universe was created to work against you if you sin, and 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 let's move on and talk more about those times when a personal agent is involved in divine wrath.

For dogs have surrounded me; A band of evil-doers has encompassed me. They pierced my hands and my feet. (Psalm 22:16)

## 5.6 CALLING OFF THE DOGS

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 viewed the mechanics of divine wrath. What they are often talking about is God withdrawing and His enemies rushing in like a pack of rabid dogs. Psalm 6, for example, is one of many desperate pleas for God to "call off the dogs."<sup>7</sup>

LORD, don't rebuke me in Your anger, or punish me in Your wrath. Be gracious to me, LORD, because I am wasting away. Heal me, LORD, for my bones are shaken and my soul is completely shaken; 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 the netherworld who will give You thanks? I am exhausted with my sighing. Every night I drench my bed. I soak my couch with my tears. My eye is wasted away with grief; It has become old because of all my adversaries. Get away from me, all you who do iniquity, for the LORD has heard the voice of my weeping. The LORD has heard

**my cry. The LORD receives my prayer. All my enemies will be ashamed and greatly dismayed; They will turn back, they will suddenly be ashamed. (Psalm 6:1-10)**

How, very specifically, does this sinner believe this prayer will be answered? How will God's "anger" be turned away? Like so many other psalms, there are multiple references to God's enemies. They are serving as God's agents. **"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 methods of chastening the unrepentant sinner. In this one, it literally sound like a pack of dogs.

**LORD my God, if I have done this, if I have injustice in my hands, if I have paid back evil to my friend, or have plundered a person who was my enemy without any cause, let the enemy chase down my soul and catch it, trample my life down into the ground, and lay my glory in the dirt. (Psalm 7:3-5)**

But this idea isn't just found in Israel's song book. The psalmists are writing songs about a theme that is found frequently in the historical sections of Scripture. When God's patience came to an end with the northern kingdom of Israel, for instance, the Scriptures tell us,

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

The prophets also write about this divine strategy frequently. In fact, at times they would even complain about it. Habakkuk, for instance, seems to think it's a little unfair that God's "rod" of discipline is more wicked than the nation being punished.

**Why do You tolerate the treacherous? Why do You keep silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? (Habakkuk 1:13)**

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

## **5.7 WHEN "GOD'S HAND" IS NOT "HIS HAND"**

To those unfamiliar with certain figures of speech in the Bible, it might seem like God enjoys reaching down and thumping on people. Again, 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 scientific explanation of things. All you have to do is 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 comes to serve as a default way to speak of calamity and judgment. Psalm 38, for instance, begins,

**O LORD, don't rebuke me in Your wrath,  
and don't chasten me in Your burning anger.  
For Your arrows have sunk deep into me, and  
Your hand has pressed down on me. (Psalm  
38:1-2)**

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

**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. 18-19)**

The language of appearance or experience is common to all human cultures. We don't call our local newscaster a liar for speaking about the sunrise, 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, and try to figure out just whose "hand" is doing what. It ends up looking like God fights against His own "hand" (?).

**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 2:14-16)**

Whose hand is it? Read the above passage carefully. God's hand and the enemy's hand refer to the same thing. As we have already said, God's anger and God's hand are clearly figurative ways of saying that God is allowing His enemies to afflict stubborn and rebellious people. In fact, the direct work of Satan can even be referred to as "God's hand."

## **5.8 WHEN "GOD'S HAND" IS "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 his children. These disasters are 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 there is no doubt that he will 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). Satan says to God,

**"Stretch out Your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, then 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 struck 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 that befall Job clearly reflect Satan's character, not God's. In the language of the Old Testament, however, 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, the divinity of the coming Messiah, the distinct personality of the Holy Spirit, the existence of heaven and hell, and the resurrection, to name just a handful.

It is only in the New Testament that such things are brought 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."

## 5.9 WHAT THE WICKED "SEE"

If God the Father is exactly like Jesus, what should we do with 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 shaking, and were trembling because He was angry. Smoke went up from 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 before 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. (Psalm 18:7-14)

To make sense of all this, pay careful attention to what is said a little later in this psalm. The author makes 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.<sup>8</sup>

**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 (like Moses) who get to see His glory. The Old Testament calls this sort of 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 many different ways in both the Old and New Testaments. **"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).

Psalm 18:26 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." 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.<sup>9</sup>

Could this be why the rebellious in Israel did not want to be anywhere near 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 a thousand elsewhere"** (Psalm 84:10). Perhaps this is why, even today, so many people think that the Old Testament God is some sort of monster. The problem is not with God. The problem is their spiritual perception.

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. It's 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 TOUGH-TALKING PROPHETS

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 have over the minds of the wicked ... so He can lavish them with lovingkindness. God's prophets were crystal clear on this. God didn't really want to punish Israel, or any other nation for that matter. The prophets knew a little secret. Behind the severest words of divine judgment, God's heart of lovingkindness was hiding. God yearns for absolutely everyone with an everlasting love, even His enemies (Matthew 5:43-48).<sup>10</sup>

The angry sounding message of a prophet is supposed to work like a "slap" that brings the wicked to their senses. In Exodus 32, God 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 example of how this 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 3:4). We all know the story. Instead of fulfilling his assignment, Jonah gets into 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 was hiding behind the tough prophetic word. He was well aware of God's *modus operandi*. The prophetic rebuke can be a highly effective way to trigger repentance. It certainly worked for the Ninevites, once Jonah did what he was supposed to do.



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 declared 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 later in 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 the LORD, "Please LORD, wasn't this what I said while I remained in my country? So, in order to put this off 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 4:1-2)

When people absolutely insist on rejecting God's lovingkindness, He may reluctantly give them over to wrath, but

He hates doing this. Here is a peek 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 **"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 account of this event by the ancient historian Josephus will understand better why Jesus was weeping.<sup>11</sup> The punishment of sinners has always broken God's heart. **"How can I surrender you, O Israel ... My heart is churning within Me. All my affections are enflamed"** (Hosea 11:8). In light of all the biblical evidence, we 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."

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 SCRIPTURE BALANCING SCRIPTURE

Jesus and His apostles should be the ones to clarify 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. Again, 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, he may eventually be 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).

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 misuse 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). This counter move sent a frustrated Satan scurrying back into the shadows. We need to learn to handle the enemy 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 ensnare 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 when God "stretches out His hand." We read them without balancing them 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.

The fact is that there are dozens of verses that are not technical statements about the inner mechanics of God. They are expressions of how things seem from our very limited human perspective. They are true, but we need to read and understand them properly. 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 the LORD awoke as from sleep, like a warrior overcome by wine**" (Psalm 78:65). 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 is technically going on in the realm of God.

In addition, God may talk tough through His prophets, and He may "look" terrible to the wicked ... but He is always the God of *The Derakim*, the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

### 5.13 A LOVING REBUKE FROM JESUS

One day, Jesus and His disciples, James and John, were passing through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem. The brothers 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 Samaritans got to give a bunch of "holier than thou" Jews 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 the 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 could not have been more wrong.

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.

So the next time some critic of the Bible says, "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?" You can answer, "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—not the Samaritans, or the Ninevites, or the Israelites, or Mikala, or Mercy, or you, or me. Why? Because He is **"slow to anger."**

And His greatest desire, as we will see in the next chapter, is that we become more and more like Him.

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1. What is being referred to here is one of the longest passages on God's wrath in the New Testament epistles. **"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven"** (Romans 1:18). Three times this wrath is described as **"God gave them over ..."** (Romans 1:24; 26; 28).
2. The account of the ten plagues can be found in Exodus Chapters 7-12. It begins with the waters of the Nile turning to blood, and culminates with the death of the firstborn sons of the Egyptians.
3. In the book of Isaiah, God warns wicked nation of Assyria that they too will eventually be chastened: **"Woe to you, destroyer, for a while you were not destroyed; and he who is treacherous, for a while *others* didn't deal treacherously with him. When you are finished destroying, you will be destroyed; When you are finished dealing treacherously, *others* will deal treacherously with you."** (Isaiah 33:1)
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 dealt 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. In the book of Job, one of his major errors was to oversimplify things, and assume everything can be understood with reference to only one principle—*Do good, get good. Do bad, get bad*. We shouldn't make the same mistake. 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 about as deep as a piece of paper, and therefore just flat wrong. **"Who is this who obscures counsel with ignorant words?"** (Job 42:3). See Chapter 9.
7. 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 common (6:10, 38:19, 102:8, 143:3, 6, 12).

8. In Psalm 18 this is indicated by a very rare reflexive form of the verb *hasad*, which means to show oneself to have *hesed*.
9. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (United Kingdom: Bantam Press, 2006), 31.
10. 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. (Matthew 5:43-48)
11. Speaking about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army after a four-year siege, the ancient historian Josephus wrote, "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, *The Wars of The Jews*, 6.3.200.