

Lesson 19: Understanding God's wrath and vengeance.

Memory Verse: The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked. (Psalm 58:10)

When many people read the Bible they see words they think they know and they read those meanings into the Bible without checking to see what the Bible says those words mean. Two of those words that are often misunderstood are “wrath” and “vengeance.”

We humans have assigned meanings to these words that have to do with our emotions when we are wronged. Because we are selfish and afraid, we dream up all sorts of terrible things to do to people who steal from us or hurt us in other ways. And we call it “vengeance” when those terrible things happen. “You did something terrible to me, now you are getting what you deserve and something terrible is happening to you.”

Here's some things the Bible says about “vengeance.”

“Have I not kept this in reserve
and sealed it in my vaults?
It is mine to avenge; I will repay.
In due time their foot will slip;
their day of disaster is near
and their doom rushes upon them.”
The LORD will judge his people
and have compassion on his servants
when he sees their strength is gone
and no one is left slave or free. (Deuteronomy 32:34-36)

O LORD, the God who avenges,
O God who avenges, shine forth.
Rise up, O Judge of the earth;
pay back to the proud what they deserve. (Psalm 94:1, 2)

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary:

If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this you will help burning coals on his head.” (Romans 12:17-20)

That first passage is from one of the first Psalms in the Bible, even though it's not in the book of Psalms. It's called the song of Moses. You will see that Paul quotes from it in Romans 12. The other quotation is from Proverbs.

The clear conclusion we reach from these verses is that we need to leave vengeance to God. But still a lot of people think God's vengeance will look just like the vengeance we humans would take if it were up to us. If so, then why would God tell us not to do it ourselves? But what if God's vengeance is different from the vengeance humans would take?

Therefore the Lord, the LORD Almighty,
the mighty one of Israel, declares;
“Ah, I will get relief from my foes
and avenge myself on my enemies.
I will turn my hand against you;
I will thoroughly purge away your dross
and remove your impurities.
I will restore your judges as in days of old,
your counselors as at the beginning. (Isaiah 1:24-26)

What do humans need cleaned from? From the fear and selfishness that make us do bad things to each other. Now we know God will only do this for people who give him permission to do it. So many of the wicked will not experience God's vengeance in this way because they never learn to trust God enough to give him permission to make changes in their lives.

But we humans don't know who does and who doesn't trust God, and so the message to us is to let God take care of people who harm us. If they learn to trust God they won't harm us any longer because they will learn to love as God loves. That's good for both them and us, and we know that God doesn't want anyone to die, so it's good for God too.

So if God wants to do good things for the people who do bad things, why does the Bible say so much about God's wrath? We can read about God's wrath even in the New Testament:

I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign; seven angels with the seven last plagues—
last, because with them God's wrath is completed. (Revelation 15:1)

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's
wrath through him! (Romans 5:9)

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of
men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain
to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's
invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being
understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse....

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to the sinful desires of the
hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged
the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—
who is forever praised, Amen. (Romans 1:18-20, 24, 25)

That last passage from Romans gives us a clear idea of what God's wrath is. It is not something in
which God acts to harm or destroy the objects of his wrath; it is God letting them do what they want to
do and letting them suffer the natural consequences of what they do. In essence it is God saying, “I've
done everything my character will allow me to do to save this person, and they still won't trust me. I
will have to let them go to suffer the natural consequences of sin, death.”

“How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel?

How can I treat you like Admah?
How can I make you like Zeboiim?
My heart is changed within me;
all my compassion is aroused.
I will not carry out my fierce anger,
nor devastate Ephraim again.
For I am God, and not man—
the Holy One among you.
I will not come in wrath.” (Hosea 11:8, 9)

In that verse we see the contrast between what God wants to do, which is to care for his people, and his wrath, which would be to give them up or hand them over. God is the source of life for every living thing in the universe. If God lets you go then you can no longer have life because you have been separated from the source of life.

Jesus told the disciples something very similar in these words:

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. (John 15:5, 6)

So like David and the other writers of Psalms we must learn to take our frustration about wicked people to God and leave the consequences with him. Only he knows when someone is beyond hope.

Possible thought papers:

1. Recall a time when you wanted to do something terrible to someone because of what they had done to you. What were you afraid of? What were they afraid of when they did that terrible thing to you?
2. Read about an expression of God's wrath in Psalm 78:17-31. How can this be understood as God letting the people suffer the consequences of what they wanted to do?
3. When we learn to live unselfishly we will suffer loss to those who are selfish. Write about what it means to suffer for “being a Christian” in that sense.