

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Power: Both in God's Anger and Fear

For we are consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath are we troubled. Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance. For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told. The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away. Who knoweth the power of thine anger? even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath. (Psalm 90:7-11)

We are liable to opposite extreme and unbiblical views regarding the fear of God. On one side many folks who profess faith in Christ live in morbid fear of God, a near-constant dread of being sent to eternal ruin if they don't live up to certain goals and divine expectations. Another form of this fear causes people to live in dread of something bad happening in their life, in their minds sure evidence that God is angry with them and will punish them at the drop of a hat. The other extreme idea views God as such a benevolent grandfather type being that He refuses to chasten or do anything other than indulge His children and their every wish. Here too the ideas range from the "health and wealth" or "name it and claim it" error to a basic attitude that refuses to view anything in life as divine chastening. The common refrain of this attitude is that God loves you too much to correct or chasten you for your sins. One idea violates the teaching of Scripture as dreadfully as the other. Solomon writes repeatedly that a parent who refuses to chasten his child will raise a spoiled and near useless child who thinks the whole world orbits around himself or herself.

Hebrews chapter 12 clearly sets forth divine chastening as wisely and lovingly measured correction that brings pain and solemn warning to our lives of God's displeasure with our sinful self-indulgence. Among any number of other Biblical examples, David's family painfully exhibits the toxic failure of a self-indulgent family void of clear leadership and appropriate chastening.

In Romans 11:22 Paul juxtaposes God's goodness and severity. Those of His children who "continue in his goodness" enjoy more goodness at His providence. Those of His children who fall away from God's teachings shall surely experience divine severity. One is as certain as the other.

Psalm 90 contains an incredible breadth of blessings and warnings that unpack the same idea that Paul taught in Romans 11:22. For the faithful followers of the Lord, He has "been our dwelling place in all generations." For those who turn from God and follow their own ways, David accurately describes the divine response, "For we are

consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath we are troubled.” We may deceive our friends and loved ones, but we cannot deceive God. “Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.”

The Christian life is not one big public relations campaign in which we put on a show of godliness while actually living life according to our self-serving wills. God knows our secret most thoughts and motives. We may deceive other people, but we cannot deceive God!

At first examination we are startled and troubled by the idea; “...even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath.” The implication is that divine anger is every bit as frightening and severe as we most feared. To be sure, there is an element of truth to the idea. We should fear God for, despite His amazing love, He rightly commands us to live according to His teachings, not our own wills. If we fail to follow His will, not a mystical “God has revealed to me...” but the specific revelation of His will in Scripture, we will learn in the crucible of suffering that God’s wrath is wholly as severe as we feared.

The problem that we often develop in our thinking lies in our focus, the things that we most hold prominently in our minds as we make life’s choices. Do you live in constant dreadful fear of a divine swat? Or do you live in a constant anticipation of divine goodness? If we stopped reading Psalm 90 at verse 11, we could as easily reach one conclusion as the other. Based on the model of reasoning—and living—that Moses (the stated author of this psalm)—sets forth, what is the actual outcome of our coming to terms equally with God’s goodness and His severity? Consider the verses that follow.

So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom. Return, O LORD, how long? and let it repent thee concerning thy servants. O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil. (Psalm 90:12-15)

We may reliably judge the correctness of our attitude by the manner in which we react to divine judgment or chastening in our lives. In this model psalm Moses does not describe the reaction to divine chastening in terms of paralyzing fear, but in terms of learning. It is no accident that the New Testament word for a follower of Jesus, “disciple,” literally means a student.

The proper response to divine judgment—that inevitably falls on every one of God’s children at one time or another (Hebrews 12:6-8)—is repentance and learning. Moses prayed for a tender heart that learned from God to grow in wisdom and to enjoy divine “repentance” through the practice of personal repentance.

A parent who applies chastening to his/her children in anger will inevitably cultivate a bitter heart in the child, often the mirror opposite response to the desired

objective. A parent who wisely measures predictable and suitable chastening to his/her child will nurture an attitude in the child that eagerly seeks to learn more fully the right way to live so as to honor the family and to eliminate the need for chastening. As parents in our families, we may often struggle with this fine balance. However God never fails to practice His wise and measured chastening to us so as to cultivate a healthy fear and—at the same time—a gracious and repentant transformation of our conduct. As the “rod,” wisely and properly applied, drives foolishness out of the heart of the child (Proverbs 22:15), so God’s “rod,” when properly understood, will draw our hearts to wisdom. Biblical wisdom means that we learn from God in our experiences to face life and respond to its difficulties according to God’s way. If we constantly realize that divine chastening continues on us, we should realize that we may have refused to listen to the divine “rod.”

Even in contemporary Christian thought, we often see more emphasis on the spirit of indulgence than on the value of loving and consistent discipline. There is no shortage of contemporary teaching on cultivating a positive “self-image” in the child, but cultivating an attitude in the child that self is at the center of the universe will not produce the wise child. It will produce a self-indulgent and unproductive person who will likely spend his/her whole adult life demanding that everyone and everything bow to the unsanctified demands of self. At the heart of this lesson we find a wise response to God’s correcting—and at times severe—judgment.

There is a certain irony to the time factor in this psalm. Moses, the author, lived to 120. He sets God’s eternal existence in vivid contrast with man’s brevity of life. According to Moses, man’s normal lifespan is from seventy to eighty. He compares our lifespan to “a tale that is told.” The skilled teller of tales knows that the only story that is remembered well is brief and quickly goes to the emphatic point for which it was told. The story that drags on without a clear purpose is as quickly forgotten as it was told. Did you ever notice how incredibly boring the person is who constantly talks about self? Equally boring and futile, according to this psalm, is the life that does not clearly and speedily focus on God and His goodness. The immature and adolescent mind typically focuses altogether on self. On one hand the adolescent wants to please one’s peers and to “fit in” with the crowd. On the other hand the adolescent constantly complains that everyone is “looking at me.” If we become stuck in our spiritual adolescence, we demonstrate similar traits. Someone has marveled that the adolescent mind would recoil in surprise if it realized just how little other people really notice or think of him or her!

Life gives us a finite number of days. They are spent so quickly. At the end of our life, we may be bitter or joyful at the journey that we chose during that brief time. Will we spend out time on self or in service to God and His children?

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