

Some Thoughts on the Nature of God, Part Six (Revised)

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The Nature of God (Revised)

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Revelation 6, John says,

1 Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals; and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a voice like thunder, "Come and see."

2 And I looked, and behold, a white horse. He who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.

3 When He opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, "Come and see." 4 Another horse, fiery red, went out. And it was granted to the one who sat on it to take peace from the earth, and that people should kill one another; and there was given to him a great sword.

5 When He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come and see." So I looked, and behold, a black horse, and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. 6 And I heard a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not harm the oil and the wine."

7 When He opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, "Come and see." 8 So I looked, and behold, a pale horse. And the name of him who sat on it was Death, and Hades followed with him. And power was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, with hunger, with death, and by the beasts of the earth.

9 When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. 10 And they cried with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" 11 Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the

number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.

12 I looked when He opened the sixth seal, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood. 13 And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind. 14 Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place. 15 And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, 16 and said to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! 17 For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"

May God's blessing rest upon his word. Let's pray.

Almighty God, as we consider your holy nature, as we consider your justice, as we consider your wrath, we pray for your Spirit to teach us, to guide us, to enlighten us. Lord, we pray that if there be some here this day still dead in sins, without hope, without Christ, that this might be the day of salvation. We ask it in Christ's name. Amen.

In the message that he calls "The Trauma of Holiness," Dr. R. C. Sproul recounts his interaction with a woman from Oakland, California. He said she came to him and she was very distressed. She told him that she was angry with her pastor. Now, if you've ever had any interaction with a pastor, you know there's nothing too surprising about that but she went on, "I get the feeling that for some reason my minister every Sunday is doing everything he can to conceal the true identity of God from the congregation. I come to church and I long to have an opportunity to worship, to have my soul experience reverence for God and adoration but the God I'm hearing about is a God who has defanged. He's been tamed. He's become innocuous and I'm sure the reason the minister does this is because he doesn't want to frighten people by explaining the true character of God." Dr. Sproul said, "I don't know how accurate that woman's complaint was but I do know that we all have a tendency to soft-pedal the biblical portrait of God and there's a reason for that: the holiness of God is traumatic to an unholy people." The holiness is God is traumatic to an unholy people.

When God spoke to Habakkuk, here was the prophet's reaction, "When I heard, my body trembled; My lips quivered at the voice; Rottenness entered my bones; And I trembled in myself," Habakkuk 3. When God spoke to Job, Job said, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, But now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, And repent in dust and ashes," Job 42. You remember that at Mount Sinai, "Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. Then they said to Moses, 'You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.'" When Isaiah "saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the

train of His robe filled the temple,” what did Isaiah cry out? “Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The Lord of hosts.” Calvin speaks of that dread and terror by which holy men of old trembled before God as the Scripture uniformly relates.

In our series on the nature of God, we turned our attention last week to God's holiness and it is, of course, a glorious aspect of his character. In his book “The Existence and Attributes of God,” Stephen Charnock gave a wonderful description of God's holiness. “The holiness of God is his glory and crown. It is the blessedness of his nature. It renders him glorious in himself, and glorious to his creatures. 'Holy' is more fixed as an epithet to his name than any other. This is his greatest title of honor. He is pure and unmixed light, free from all blemish in his essence, nature, and operations. He cannot be deformed by any evil. The notion of God cannot be entertained without separating from him whatever is impure and staining. Though he is majestic, eternal, almighty, wise, immutable, merciful, and whatsoever other perfections may dignify so sovereign a being, yet if we conceive him destitute of this excellent perfection, and imagine him possessed with the least contagion of evil, we make him but an infinite monster, and sully all those perfections we ascribed to him before.”

“It is a contradiction for him to be God and to have any darkness mixed with his light. To deny his purity, makes him no God. He that says God is not holy, speaks much worse than if he said there is no God at all. Where do we read of the angels crying out Eternal, Eternal, Eternal or Faithful, Faithful, Faithful Lord God of hosts? But we do hear them singing Holy, Holy, Holy. God swears by his holiness (Psa. 89:35). His holiness is a pledge for the assurance of his promises. Power is his hand, omniscience his eye, mercy his heart, eternity his duration, but holiness his beauty. It renders him lovely and gives beauty to all his attributes. Every action of his is free from all hints of evil. Holiness is the crown of all his attributes, the life of all his decrees, and the brightness of all his actions. Nothing is decreed by him and nothing is acted by him that is not consistent with the beauty of his holiness.”

But as we draw to a close today, this brief series on the nature of God, I think it will be helpful if we proceed or progress from thoughts on God's holiness to its natural result: God's justice and God's wrath. Now, if I were to ask for a show of hands in response to this question: how many of you adore God's holiness? I'm sure that most if not all of your hands would go up either because you genuinely do adore God's holiness or you just don't want to be the only person in church without his hand up to a question like that, right? But if I were to ask: how many of you adore God's justice and wrath? Well, I suspect the response would be less enthusiastic. But God's holiness manifests itself in his justice and his wrath.

Dr. A. W. Pink wrote, “Our readiness or our reluctance to meditate upon the wrath of God becomes a sure test of our hearts' true attitude toward Him. If we do not truly rejoice in God, for what He is in Himself, and that because of all the perfections which are eternally resident in Him, then how dwells the love of God in us? Each of us needs to be

most prayerfully on his guard against devising an image of God in our thoughts which is patterned after our own evil inclinations.”

Not only could it be safely said that many Christians don't adore God's justice and wrath, I think it could be safely said that many Christians or at least many who think of themselves as Christians don't even believe in God's justice and wrath. You see, the same spirit of unbelief that causes people to disbelieve in the reality of Satan causes them to disbelieve in the reality of God's judgment and God's wrath. Now, I cited before the response of a cross section of Americans to the following question posed by the George Barna research group. They asked: do you agree or disagree with this statement: the devil or Satan is not a living being but is a symbol of evil. You may recall, 69% of Roman Catholics agreed with that statement; 65% of mainline Protestants; 47% of those like us who are associated with an evangelical church. Listen to it again: Satan is not a living being but is a symbol of evil. 4% of evangelicals said they didn't know. Put those figures together, 47% said yes, I agree to that statement that he's not a living being and then 4% say they're not sure, over half, according to this survey anyway, of evangelicals say they either don't believe that Satan is a living being or they just don't know.

Now, the same spirit of unbelief fostered no doubt by the father of lies himself, that causes us to disbelieve in his existence despite the abundant biblical evidence including, as you will recall, recorded conversations between Satan and the Lord God, that same spirit causes many to disbelieve in something that is equally unpalatable: the justice and wrath of God. Despite the very clear biblical warnings of impending judgment. “And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire,” Revelation 20. “Every man's work shall be made manifest for the day shall declare it because it shall be revealed by fire and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is,” 1 Corinthians 3:13. “We shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ,” Romans 14:10. “It is appointed unto men once to die and after this the judgment,” Hebrews 9:27.

A good number of those who believe in the wrath and judgment of God like I trust many of us here, take pains nonetheless to avoid the subject concluding, no doubt, that it's not what people want to hear. Sadly, many of those who stand in pulpits. It's not just in Oakland that congregations are hearing about a God who has been defanged, a God who has been tamed. The winsome pastor of America's largest church interviewed on national television was asked if he ever uses the word “sinners” in his preaching. He responded, “I don't use it. I never thought about it but I probably don't. Most people already know when they've done something wrong.” Now, do you suppose if he doesn't use the word “sinners” that the words “the judgment of God” or “the wrath of God” ever cross his lips in the pulpit? “Sure, we have our faults,” he said, “but the good news is God loves us anyway.” His message sounds very similar to that of Robert Schuller, one of his predecessors among America's most popular pastors. He said, “To tell people that they're sinners is the wrong message. Tell them they are children of God and then they'll begin to live like children of God.”

In a book that he mailed freely to pastors across America, he wrote, "What is the central underlying theme in the Lord's Prayer?" Now, I had a few minutes to think about that, you think about it. What is the central underlying theme in the Lord's Prayer? "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom...." I would say and if you had a few minutes you would probably say too that the central theme would be the glory of God our Father and our utter dependence upon him, "give us this day our daily bread, lead us not into temptation." Right? So, if you wanted to summarize the theme of the Lord's Prayer you might say, "The central underlying theme of the Lord's Prayer would be the glory of our Father God and our utter dependence upon him." Here's what he said is the central underlying theme of the Lord's Prayer, "It is the priceless value of every person. The church must make this message crystal clear. We must proclaim the good news. God wants to reclaim and redeem lost humanity. We must tell people everywhere," what? What's this big message we have to tell people? "That God wants all of us to feel good about ourselves." It sounds a lot like, "Sure, we have our faults but the good news is that God loves us anyway."

Dr. Schuller also said, "What is the basic problem in the world today?" Now, I think you could answer this one. What is the basic problem in the world today? What I'm saying is that you could answer that without a whole lot of contemplation. The basic problem in the world today is that we're in a fallen world, that's one way to answer that. Our depravity, man's total depravity. Our rebellion against God. Sin, if you want to make it succinct. Sin. What's the basic problem in the world today? It's sin. Here's what it is according to Dr. Schuller, "Many human beings don't realize who they are and if we don't know who we are and where we've come from, we'll never become what we were meant to be. For an identity crisis, I don't know who I am, will generate a self-acceptance crisis, I don't feel like I'm accepted. But if we perceive ourselves as children of God, then he is our Father and we have an inheritance waiting for us." All I have to do is perceive myself as a child of God and then he's my Father.

Now, how influential such teaching has been is evidenced by something pollster George Gallup said to the National Convention of the Evangelical Press Association several years ago. He said, "We believe in God but this God is often a totally affirming one. He does not command our total allegiance." If you've been to many funerals, you've heard this message. It's assumed that the departed is in glory because he's died. God is totally affirming. Now, he might keep Hitler out of heaven but he might. Many of you will remember the passage from the Chronicles of Narnia when the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve first learned about Aslan. Lucy asked Mr. Beaver, "Is he safe?" "Safe," said Mr. Beaver, "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." The God many here proclaim today is a God who has been defanged, he's been declawed. He's not only good but he's quite safe.

"It's sad indeed," wrote Pastor A. W. Pink, "to find so many professing Christians who appear to regard the wrath of God as something for which they need to make an apology, or who at least wish there were no such thing. While some who would not go so far as to openly admit that they consider it a blemish on the divine character, yet they are far from

regarding it with delight; they do not like to think about it, and they rarely hear it mentioned without a secret resentment rising up in their hearts against it.” Any of you feel a secret resentment rising up in your hearts against it? “Even with those who are more sober in their judgment, not a few seem to imagine that there is a severity about the divine wrath that makes it too terrifying to form a theme for profitable contemplation. Others harbor the delusion that God's wrath is not consistent with His goodness, and so seek to banish it from their thoughts.”

But the fact is, as we read in Paul's letter to the Romans, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven.” It was revealed in the Garden. It was revealed in Sodom and Gomorrah. It was revealed in the Flood. It was revealed against Pharaoh. The wrath of God was revealed against his people in the wilderness wandering. It was revealed in the destruction of the Canaanites. It was revealed after that great contest on Mount Carmel. It was revealed upon the prophets of Baal. It was revealed in the Assyrian captivity. It was revealed in the Babylonian captivity. The wrath of God was revealed in the destruction of Jerusalem. And, of course, it was revealed most clearly when there was darkness at noon in Jerusalem and the Son of God and Son of man endured the wrath of his Father on behalf of the sons of men. The truth is, the wrath of God is as much of a divine perfection as is his mercy or his faithfulness or his goodness or his love.

You see, if God were indifferent to sin, it would be a moral blemish upon his character. If God were indifferent to sin, it would be a moral blemish upon his character just as if a king were indifferent to sin in his realm. “Your Majesty, some of your subjects, violent men, are reportedly roaming in bands through the kingdom abusing the innocent, confiscating their lands, defiling their women, kidnapping their children and enslaving them.” “Yes, yes, my subjects have their faults but I love them anyway. How are the preparations coming for this month's royal banquet?”

You see, he who does not hate sin is a moral leper. A. W. Pink says, “How could He who is the Sum of all excellency look with equal satisfaction upon virtue and vice, wisdom and folly? How could He who is infinitely holy disregard sin and refuse to manifest His severity toward it? How could He who delights only in that which is pure and lovely, loathe and hate not that which is impure and vile? The very nature of God makes Hell as real a necessity, as imperatively and eternally requisite as Heaven is.” It's through God's justice that his holiness is displayed.

The Scripture says, “He is the Rock, His work is perfect; For all His ways are justice, A God of truth and without iniquity; Just and right is He,” Deuteronomy 32:4. “The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether,” Psalm 19. Psalm 33 says, “He loves righteousness and judgment.” Abraham asked, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” Because God is holy, he always will do right. Such is God's holy indignation towards sin that the Bible calls it an abhorrence, even a hatred. Psalm 5, “You hate all workers of iniquity. The Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.” Psalm 7, “God is a just Judge and God is angry with the wicked every day.” Proverbs 11:20, “Those who are of a perverse heart are an abomination to the Lord.”

Now, how can this be? Didn't Jesus weep over Jerusalem in Luke 19 when they had rejected him? Doesn't it say that he loved the rich young ruler who rejected his message? "Jesus beholding him loved him." Doesn't the Lord have a general love for all mankind? How then can he hate all workers of iniquity? Well, we understand how he can love the sinner and hate the sin and we're expected to do the same but how can he love sinners and also hate workers of iniquity? Doesn't the Scripture say he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked? Well, in God's dealings with his chosen people, we get some insight into this conundrum. We see both compassion and anger or abhorrence. It's the righteous anger that a husband or a wife might feel toward an adulterous spouse. There is a righteous anger that a husband will feel toward an adulterous wife or a wife will feel towards an adulterous husband. You might even call it a holy hatred.

In Jeremiah, the Lord says to his rebellious people, "You have seen all the calamity that I have brought on Jerusalem and on all the cities of Judah; and behold, this day they are a desolation, and no one dwells in them, because of their wickedness which they have committed to provoke Me to anger, in that they went to burn incense and to serve other gods whom they did not know, they nor you nor your fathers. However I have sent to you all My servants the prophets, rising early and sending them, saying, 'Oh, do not do this abominable thing that I hate!' But they did not listen or incline their ear to turn from their wickedness, to burn no incense to other gods. So My fury and My anger were poured out and kindled in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; and they are wasted and desolate, as it is this day," Jeremiah 44. Perhaps this righteous anger that God had toward his own chosen people whom he loved with an everlasting love, Jeremiah 31:3, can give us some insight into those passages that speak of his hatred and abhorrence of all workers of iniquity, those who were created in his image. "You're defiling my image with your lust and your anger and your hatred and your murder and rape. You're defiling my image." Of course he's angry with the wicked.

Now, if you want to avoid all passages that refer to God's justice and wrath, you're going to have to avoid the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ who, when warning his disciples about the sin of adultery, said "Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart and if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish," in this case your right eye, "than for your whole body to be cast into hell," Matthew 5. You're going to have to avoid the teachings of the Lord Jesus who said, "Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction and there are many who go in by it," Matthew 7. Who said, "Many will come from east and west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth," Matthew 8. It was the Lord Jesus who said, "Do not fear those who kill the body and cannot kill the soul but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."

You see, Jesus believed which is just another way of saying Jesus knew, that there is a real place of real anguish. The name of it is translated into English as "hell." It's described as a place of fire and darkness. A place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. A place where the fire is not quenched. A place where those who do not repent of their sins,

those who do not repent of their sins and rest in the Redeemer God has provided in this life, will face the wrath of a holy God, a God who is described as a consuming fire. Now you say, "Wait a minute, Preacher. That's all figurative language obviously." Well, perhaps but it is attempting to describe something that is very real. It is figurative language, if you will, attempting to describe something that is very real.

Now, I suppose that most of us don't have a problem with the concept of justice in general. We believe there should be punishment for rapists and serial killers and child molesters and human traffickers etc. but some of us may have a little trouble conceiving how a run-of-the-mill sinner, a man or a woman who has committed no crime that our society would deem worthy of death, someone who works hard, loves his family, keeps his yard mowed, helps his neighbors, how that person deserves an eternity of punishment. It seems to us much too harsh. Now, what does that tell us? Evidently, now that we're no longer holy creatures, now that we've rebelled against our Maker and fallen from grace, now that we've been tainted, defiled, stained by sin in every aspect of our nature, we no longer have a clear concept of holiness and justice. We don't see sin for the horror that it is. We don't view it as vile, as treasonous. We're living immersed in a cesspool of sin and we don't perceive that the water is foul. It's the only environment we know.

Christian, if God says eternal punishment is what sin deserves then you may be sure that sin deserves eternal punishment. We should note also that God makes it clear that the judgment of God will be meted out more severely on some than on others. "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you devour widow's houses and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation." Now, we don't know exactly what that will look like. "And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words," Jesus said to the 12, "when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet. Assuredly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city." Jesus said, "And that servant who knew his master's will and did not prepare himself to do according to his will shall be beaten with many stripes but he who did not know yet committed things deserving of stripes shall be beaten with few. For to everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required."

One thing is sure: the Judge of all the earth will do right. Amen? "Far be from God that he should do wickedness and from the Almighty that he should commit iniquity," Job 34:10. Listen, the message of the Bible is really very simple and is very wonderful: if God is holy, and he is, and if we are sinners, and we are, then we will face judgment. We shall. Our high treason deserves and demands justice. Death and separation from the God whom we have offended in a place of punishment. That's what our sins deserve. But God's love for lost sinners compelled him to provide a Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ. So we have a message for a lost world. It's not, "Smile, God loves you," it's not, "I'm okay, you're okay," it's not, "You have your faults but the good news is that God loves you anyway," it's not, "God wants us all to feel good about ourselves." The message we have for a lost world is, "Flee from the wrath to come. Repent and believe the gospel." The message we have for a lost world is, "How shall we escape if we neglects so great a salvation?"

The message is: You and I deserve God's wrath because we've broken his holy laws but his love for sinners was so great he covenanted with his Son to redeem us. Jesus was the sacrificial Lamb, the Lamb of God, who came to keep his Father's laws, the laws that you broke, the laws that I broke, and then to pay the price of sin which you owed, which I owed. If you will repent of your sin and trust in Christ alone, rest in him, transfer your faith to him, rely upon him as your salvation, not yourself, not your keeping the Ten Commandments, not your keeping the Golden Rule, not your measly efforts to please God and placate God but in him, the one who lived a perfect life and died upon the cross as your substitute. If you'll rest in him, the Bible says, you'll have everlasting life. All your sins will be forgiven. You'll be redeemed, renewed. And then when you stand at the bar of God's judgment, you will not stand there alone. Amen. You will have an Advocate, Jesus Christ the righteous one. "Father, this one is mine. He's one of my sheep. She's one of my lambs. All her debt has been cast on me. She must and shall go free."

Let's pray.

O Father, you know our frame, you know how our minds work or fail to work in this fallen state in which we're in. Lord, it's hard for us to grasp an eternity of punishment, an eternity of separation from you. It's hard for us to get our minds around it even as it's hard for us to contemplate an infinite God who had no beginning and will have no end. Yet, Lord, your word says it and we believe it so, Lord, help us. Help us, Lord, to have compassion upon those around us who are perishing without Christ: men and women, boys and girls who don't know this way of salvation, who may never have heard the name of Jesus used other than as a swear word. Lord, please, use us to spread this good news and, again, Father, if there's someone here this day still outside of Christ, please Lord, as you opened our hearts, as you mercifully gave us sight, as you took away that heart of stone and gave us a heart of flesh, as you breathed upon these dry bones that they might live, do that, Lord, this day for those who are here without Christ. Please Lord, have mercy upon them. Draw them to yourself. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.