

**~Other Speakers G-L: Martyn-Lloyd Jones:**

Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. - Ephesians 2:3

We now come to look at the apostle's final statement about man in sin; and that is, that he is under the wrath of God. In other words Paul deals with sin, as sin affects man's standing before God. He shows what God says and thinks and does about man in that condition which we have already considered: There can be no question at all but that this is the most important aspect of the subject. The others were vitally important, but there is nothing which is as important as this. It is because we so constantly forget this that the world is as it is today - and indeed that the Church is as she is. We are so self-centred and concerned about ourselves that we fail to remember that the most important thing above all else is the way in which God looks down upon it all. That is the subject with which we now have to deal.

The apostle puts it like this. He says that "we were all by nature the children of wrath, even as others". Here we have a twofold statement. And there is no doubt at all but that these two matters that we are compelled to look at together are two of the most difficult and perplexing subjects in the whole realm and range of biblical doctrine. That is why they have often led to great misunderstanding, and are subjects which people often in their ignorance not only fail to understand but bitterly resent. There is no subject, perhaps, which has more frequently led people to speak - albeit unconsciously - in a blasphemous manner, than this very matter which we are now going to consider. The apostle says two things: that we are all under the wrath of God; and secondly that we are all under the wrath of God by nature.

Why should we examine these things? Someone may well ask that question. Why spend our time on a subject like this, a difficult subject? There are so many other things that are interesting at the present time and attracting attention. Why not deal with them? And in any case, amid all the problems that confront the world, why turn to something like this?

Well, lest there be someone who is harbouring some such idea, and is provoked to put such a question, let me suggest certain reasons why it behoves us to consider this matter. The first is that it is part of Scripture. It is here in the Bible and, as we shall see, it is everywhere in the Bible. And if we regard the Bible as the Word of God, and our authority in all matters of faith and conduct, we cannot pick and choose; we must take it as it is and consider its every part and portion.

Secondly, we must do so because what we are told here is, after all, a question of fact. It is not theory, it is a statement of fact. If the biblical doctrine of the wrath of God is true, then it is the most important fact confronting every one of us at this moment; infinitely more important than any international conference that may be held, infinitely more important than whether there is to be a third world war or not. If this doctrine is true, then we are all involved in it, and our eternal destiny depends upon it. And the Bible states everywhere that it is a fact.

Another reason for considering it is this: that the apostle's whole argument is that we can never understand the love of God until we understand this doctrine. It is - the way in which we measure the love of God. There is a great deal of talk today about the love of God, and yet were we truly to love God, we would express it, we would show it. To love God is not merely to talk about it; to love God, as He Himself points out constantly in His Word, is to keep His commandments and to live for His glory. The argument here is that we really cannot understand the love of God unless we see it in the light of this other doctrine which we are now considering. So it is essential from that standpoint.

Let me put it in this way. I suggest that we can never truly understand why it is that the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, had to come into this world unless we understand this doctrine of the wrath of God and the judgment of God. As Christians we believe that the Son of God came into this world, that He laid aside the insignia of His eternal glory, was born as a babe in Bethlehem, and endured all that He endured, because that was essential for our salvation. But the question is, Why was it essential to our salvation? Why did all that have to take place before we could be saved? I defy anyone to answer that question adequately without bringing in this doctrine of the judgment of God and of the wrath of God. This is still more true when you look at the great doctrine of the cross and the death of our blessed Lord and Saviour. Why did Christ die? Why had He to die? If we say that we are saved by His blood, why are we saved by His blood? Why was it essential that He should die on that cross and be buried and rise again before we could be saved? There is only one adequate answer to these questions, and that is this doctrine of the wrath of God. The death of our Lord upon the cross is not absolutely necessary unless this doctrine is true. So, you see, it is a vital matter for us to consider.

Lastly, I would put it in a very practical form. This doctrine is essential from the standpoint of a true evangelism. Why is it that people do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? Why is it that people are not Christians and not members of the Christian Church? Why does the Lord Jesus Christ not come into their calculations at all? In the last analysis there is only one answer to that question: they do not believe in Him because they have never seen any need of Him. And they have never seen any need of Him because they have never realised that they are sinners. And they have never realised that they are sinners because they have never realised the truth about the holiness of God and the justice and the righteousness of God; they have never known anything about God as the judge eternal and about the wrath of God against the sin of man. So you see this doctrine is essential in evangelism. If we really believe in salvation and in our absolute need of the Lord Jesus Christ, we must start with this doctrine. There, then, are the reasons for considering it. The apostle supplies them; I am simply repeating them.

Now let us look at the two statements themselves. The first thing the apostle says is that all who are born into this world are under the wrath of God. He says we "were all the children of wrath, even as others"; we were all the children of wrath, as the rest of mankind - that is what "even as others" means. Here we come face to face with this tremendous doctrine which I know full well is not only unpopular at the present time but is even hated and detested. People can scarcely control themselves as they speak about it. The whole modern idea has been for a number of years, that God is a God of love and that we must think of God only in terms of love. To talk about the wrath of God, we are told, is utterly incompatible with any idea of God as a God of love. The way in which it is put is this. They say: Of course that idea of the wrath of God stems from the ancient idea of God as a sort of tribal God. The trouble is that there are still certain Christians who believe in that God of the Old Testament, who was nothing but a tribal God. The gods of mythology were all of that type and of that kind; they displayed their anger and their wrath; but, of course, we know now from the New Testament and from Jesus that this is quite wrong and quite false. We no longer believe in the God of the Old Testament, we believe in the God of the New Testament, in the God and Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. You are familiar with the argument. Indeed, some go even further, and say that it is only during the past century that we really have become sufficiently enlightened to understand these matters, and that, until the beginning of this present century, people still believed in the wrath of God, and, therefore, had a completely false conception of God. I remember reading a very learned book in which the author stated that this idea of the wrath of God was nothing but a kind of projection into the character of God of the notion of the typical Victorian father, the stern repressive father who kept his children down and disciplined them severely and punished them. His suggestion was that people just carried that idea over and projected it right into God Himself. But that, he held, was nothing but a false bit of psychology from which we have by now delivered ourselves, and we now know that the idea of wrath in a God of love is something that is self-contradictory.

Is there any answer to such contentions? Let me dispose of one preliminary misunderstanding. There are some people who completely misinterpret the very term wrath. They think of wrath instinctively as some uncontrolled manifestation of anger. They cannot think of it apart from the idea of somebody trembling in a rage and pale with passion, who has lost self-control and is speaking in a violent manner and doing violent things. Now that is quite a false and wrong idea of the meaning of wrath. Sinful man, it is true, does sometimes manifest his wrath in this way, but all that does not enter at all into the term as used of God in the Bible. Wrath is nothing but a manifestation of indignation based upon justice. Indeed, we can go further and assert that the wrath of God, according to the scriptural teaching, is nothing but the other side of the love of God. It is the inevitable corollary of the rejection of the love of God. God is a God of love, but God is also and equally a God of justice and of righteousness; and if God's love is spurned and rejected there remains nothing but the justice and the righteousness and the wrath of God.

Now let us demonstrate the contention that this is something which is taught everywhere in the Scripture. In the Old Testament it is to be found at the very beginning. When man fell in the garden of Eden, God visited and spoke to him and pronounced judgment upon him. He drove him out of the garden, and there at the eastern gate of the garden He placed the cherubim and the flaming sword. What is the meaning of the flaming sword? It means just this very thing; it is the sword of God's justice, it is God's sword of wrath and of punishment, punishing man for his sin and making it impossible for him to come back and eat of the tree of life and live for ever. There, at the very beginning, is a manifestation of God's righteous judgment and His wrath upon sin. It is to be found running right through the Old Testament: in the story of the flood, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, and in the various punishments of the children of Israel, whether as a nation or as individuals. The Old Testament is full of this. God has given His law and He has pronounced that if men break it He will punish them - that is His wrath. And when they have done so He has punished them. He has punished individuals, He has punished the nation, even His own chosen people. He punished them, He poured His wrath upon them by raising up the Chaldean army which came and sacked Jerusalem and carried away the people as captives into Babylon. That was a manifestation of the wrath and the righteous judgment of God. It is everywhere in the Old

Testament; you really cannot believe the Old Testament unless you accept this doctrine of the wrath of God.

When you come to the New Testament, in spite of all that modern critics would have us believe, the doctrine is again present everywhere. The first preacher in the New Testament is John the Baptist. What did he say? He said, "Flee from the wrath to come"; "Repent and be baptised every one of you, flee from the wrath to come". The Pharisees came to be baptised of John, and he looked at them and said, "Who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" It was his great message. Indeed it was the message of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. But, and most surprising of all, we find it in the verse that is generally quoted as the supreme statement of God as a God of love - John 3: 16, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son". Why did He do so? The answer is "that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life". The alternative to everlasting life is perishing. And it is John 3: 16 that teaches it. But the thirty - sixth verse of that third chapter of John is still more plain, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life, and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him". In other words, all men are under the wrath of God, and unless we believe on the Son of God the wrath of God abides upon us. What can be more plain or explicit? There it is in the Gospel of John the apostle of love.

The apostle Paul teaches the same truth equally clearly. Preaching in Athens he says that, "God hath appointed a day in which he will judge the whole world in righteousness by this man whom he hath appointed". judgment! The wrath of God! In Romans 1: 18, we read: "For the wrath of God is manifested [is already revealed] from heaven, against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men". Paul has no gospel apart from this; it is because of the wrath of God that he is preaching the gospel. In this Epistle to the Ephesians which we are considering, in the fifth chapter and the sixth verse, you get exactly the same thing, "Let no man deceive you with vain words", says Paul "for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience". Again, in summarising his gospel to the Thessalonians in the First Epistle and in the first chapter and the last verse, Paul says that the Thessalonians have turned to Christ and await Him from heaven - what for?--well, he says, because He "delivered us from the wrath to come". The same idea is to be found in the Epistle to the Hebrews in several places. And if you go right on to the Book of Revelation you will find it there in a most remarkable phrase. It is a phrase about the "wrath of the Lamb". It seems quite contradictory, quite paradoxical. You think of a lamb in terms of innocence, harmlessness. And yet there is this pregnant phrase, "the wrath of the Lamb". It is the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the whole world who is to judge the world in righteousness. So it is quite clear that the idea that love and wrath are incompatible is a complete denial of the plain teaching of the Scriptures. Indeed I would go so far as to say that unless we start with this idea of the wrath of God against sin we cannot possibly understand the compassion of God, we cannot understand the love of God. It is only as I realise God's wrath against sin that I realise the full significance of His providing a way of salvation from it. If I do not understand this I do not understand that, and my talk about the love of God is mere loose sentimentality which is indeed a denial of the great biblical doctrine of the love of God.

The apostle's teaching, then, is that until we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ we are under the wrath of God. And the wrath of God is an expression of God's hatred of sin, an expression of God's punishment of sin. It is a clear statement to this effect, that if we die in our sins we go on to eternal punishment. That is the teaching of Scripture. The wrath of God against sin manifests itself finally in hell, where men and women remain outside the life of God in misery and wretchedness, slaves to their own lusts and desires, selfish and self-centred. The apostle's teaching is that that is the position of all who are not Christians. They are under the wrath of God in this life, they will remain under the wrath of God in the next life. That is the position of the sinner, according to Scripture. If you object to the idea you are objecting to the Scriptures, you are setting up some philosophic idea of your own contrary to their plain teaching. You are not arguing with me, you are arguing with the Scriptures. You are arguing with these holy apostles, you are arguing with the Son of God Himself. If you believe that the Bible is divinely inspired, then you must not say, "But I don't understand". You are not asked to understand. I do not understand it, I do not pretend to understand it. But I start from this basis, that my mind is not only finite but is, furthermore, sinful, and that I cannot possibly understand fully the nature of God and the justice and the holiness of God. If we are going to base everything on our understanding, then we might as well give up at this point. For the Bible tell us that "the natural man" and "the natural mind" cannot understand the things of the Spirit of God (see I Corinthians 2). It was the desire to understand that led to the Fall. Intellectual pride and arrogance is the first and the last sin. The business of preaching is not to ask people to understand; the commission of the preacher is to proclaim the message. And the message is that all are under the wrath of God until they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. But indeed we must go even one step further.

That brings us to the second matter. The apostle says that we are all in that condition by nature - "we were all by nature the children of wrath, even as others". What does this by nature mean? We have already shown in a previous study in this series that this has one meaning only, and that is, "by birth". We were all by our very birth the children of wrath even as others. You notice that the apostle does not say that we "become" the

children of wrath because of our nature; he says we "were". In other words the apostle, in line with the whole of the Bible, does not teach that we are born into this world in a state of innocence or in a state of neutrality, and that then, because we sin, we become sinners and thereby come under the wrath of God. That is not what he says: he says the exact opposite. He says that we are born into this world under the wrath of God; from the moment of our birth we are already under the wrath of God. It is not only something that is going to happen to us, neither is it something that results only from our actions. There are people who teach that, but that is a blank denial not only of the teaching here but, as we shall see, of the teaching elsewhere in Scripture. He does not say that we are under the wrath of God only because of our nature or because of the manifestation of our nature. He says that we are in that position "by birth".

What, then, does this mean? The answer is to be found in the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans where it is argued out in detail and thoroughly from verse twelve to the end of the chapter. What is the argument? Let me summarise it. In that chapter the one great truth the apostle is concerned to prove is that our relationship, as believers to the Lord Jesus Christ is exactly analogous to our relationship formerly to Adam