

## When love meets evil

Now if God's holiness can seem off-putting, his wrath can seem hideous. And if God is not triune, it is. If God is just the biggest boy in the school who must have his every way or else lose it in fits of carpet-biting rage, then his anger is repellent. All his other good qualities would be as nothing when we saw those red eyes. Yet that is just how God's anger is often seen. Commenting on Romans 1:18 ('The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men'), New Testament scholar Stephen Moore writes: 'We can almost hear the bones cracking on the wheel as the might of the offended sovereign bears down upon the body of the condemned.'<sup>10</sup>

But. In fact, let me say that again: *But*. However it might be with other gods, that is just not how it is with the Father, Son and Spirit. With this God, it is not as if sometimes he *has* love and sometimes he *has* wrath, as if those are different moods so that when he's feeling one he's not feeling the other. No, for all eternity the Father was loving his Son, but never once was he angry. Why? Because there was nothing to be angry with until Adam sinned in Genesis 3. So God's anger at evil from Genesis 3 onwards is a *new* thing: it is how the God who is love responds to evil.

Like God's holiness, then, his wrath is not something that sits awkwardly next to his love. Nor is it something unrelated to his love. God is angry at evil *because* he loves. Isaiah speaks of the pouring out of God's wrath as his '*strange work*', his '*alien task*' (Isaiah 28:21) because it is not that God is naturally angry, but that evil provokes him: in his pure love, God cannot tolerate evil. That makes complete sense to me as a father: if I could twiddle my thumbs and yawn while my daughters suffered, it would prove I didn't really love them; but precisely *because* I so love them I hate the thought of

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anything evil befalling them. How much more is it so with the Father of lights, in whom there is no darkness at all. Love cares, and that means it cannot be indifferent to evil. 'Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good' (Romans 12:9). Only such love is sincere.

Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf has described how it took the horrors of ethnic warfare happening around him to appreciate the goodness of God's wrath:

I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn't God love? Shouldn't divine love be beyond wrath? God is love, and God loves every person and every creature. That's exactly why God is wrathful against some of them. My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath was a casualty of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3,000,000 were displaced. My villages and cities were destroyed, my people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry. Or think of Rwanda in the last decade of the past century where 800,000 people were hacked to death in one hundred days! How did God react to the carnage? By doting on the perpetrators in a grandparently fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath but instead affirming the perpetrators' basic goodness? Wasn't God fiercely angry with them? Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who *wasn't* wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful *because* God is love."

Were God not triune, and so not eternally love, his wrath would make him look like an overgrown, foot-stamping toddler, a fight-picking yob or a merciless sultan. Think of the hormonal outbursts of the gods of ancient Greece and Rome. But with the God who is eternally love, his anger must rise *from* that love. Thus his anger is holy, set apart from our temper-tantrums; it is how he in



‘Let there be light!’

The wrath of the triune God is exactly the opposite of a character blip or a nasty side in him. It is the proof of the sincerity of his love, *that he truly cares*. His love is not mild-mannered and limp; it is livid, potent and committed. And therein lies our hope: through his wrath the living God shows that he is truly loving, and through his wrath he will destroy all devilry that we might enjoy him in a purified world, the home of righteousness.

his love reacts to evil. The Father loves his Son, and so hates sin, which ultimately is rejection of the Son; he loves his children, and so hates their being oppressed; he loves his world, and so hates all evil in it. Thus in his love he roots out sin in his people, even disciplining them that they might be freed from their captivity to it. In his love he is patient with us. And in his love he promises finally to destroy all evil as light destroys darkness.