

THE WRATH OF GOD¹

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As the 19th century gave way to the 20th century, the State of Michigan was growing and developing. At that time the most progressive printing plant was in the city of Battle Creek—the Review and Herald Publishing Association.

Founded by dedicated members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Review and Herald had been solemnly dedicated to the Lord for the publication of books and articles proclaiming the nearness of the second coming of Christ, and the preparation of heart necessary for us to have in order to be ready for it.

There was no work in the world in progress at that time more important than this. (Even today there is no work being done anywhere as important!)

But some unwise participants in the work embraced the idea that if the Publishing House were to introduce job printing as business, they could make extra money for the institution that would make it possible to print the gospel message more cheaply, and therefore (so the idea went) could make possible a greater distribution of the good truth-filled literature.

So the managers embraced the job-printing idea, and had the typesetters and press operators of necessity seeing and reading this non-Christian literature, some of it downright wildly pagan. The

young people who were the pressmen and proofreaders were forced to see and read this literature promoting paganism!

Ellen White said that the Lord loved those youth too much to allow them to poison their minds by having to read and print this garbage. The Review and Herald Publishing House had been dedicated to the Lord in solemn prayer; this invited Him to enter into the crisis and to act.

Solemn warnings were uttered by the Lord's messenger, and went unheeded.

Finally, the Lord was forced to withdraw His special protection. Someone had left some oily rags used for cleaning the presses in a heap in the basement; they ignited, and the entire building went up in flames. The unbelief of His people forced the Lord to let matters take their course.

“Does God destroy or does sin?” We want to avoid any semblance of an Adventist version of Jonathan Edwards's fire and brimstone preaching. We are convinced that the true motivation for lasting conversion is an appreciation of God's love. We want to find a clearer grasp of what God's love means for the world. This conviction enables us to “glory in the cross” as the true heart of “the third angel's message in verity.” We view all of our “doctrines” in that light. Ellen White's statement is suggestive, “It is not the fear of punishment . . . that leads the disciples of Christ to follow Him. . . . Love awakens in the heart of the beholders. They . . . follow Him.”²

¹ Revelation 14:9-12. “How Great Thou Art”; 617.

² *The Desire of Ages*, p. 480.

In a statement that is apparently timeless in application she says: “God does not stand toward the sinner as an executioner of the sentence against transgression.”³ The statement does not say that God is not “an executioner;” that is left open. The point is that He does not “stand toward the sinner” in that capacity. He does not want to appear to the sinner as the “executioner,” and thus coerce by fear what He would will only by love.

Our soul-winning ministry is “toward” the alienated sinner. Our message is an evangelistic statement. The appeal is to the sinner’s heart to be reconciled to God.

Ellen White’s expression “the sentence against transgression” appears to refer to the warning in Genesis 2:17, “In the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” The last proclamation of the everlasting gospel must include that warning, which is consistent with God’s character of *agape*. God’s warning does not say, “In the day thou eatest thereof, I shall surely kill you.” Presenting Him “toward the sinner” as the “Executioner” who will carry out that sentence is not God’s soul-winning plan. God is not deceiving the unreconciled sinner with advertising cleverness. Rightly understood, even His wrath is an expression of His soul-winning love.

There are serious arguments that can be adduced in support of the fear motivation. It is not wholly or necessarily negative; a perfectly healthy person with no neuroses will look both ways before

crossing a busy street. It’s common sense. Nor can it be denied that throughout the 6000 plus years of human history God’s inspired servants have often employed fear as their motivation tool for inducing sinners to respond. The Old Testament prophets frequently speak of God destroying nations and people. There is no question that God sent the Flood to destroy sinners, also the fires of Sodom and Gomorrah, and destroyed the Egyptians at the Red Sea crossing.

The question that is of concern to us is what appeal will God use in that final “lighting of the earth with glory”? A “voice” will sound from heaven with unprecedented power, “Come out of [Babylon], My people.” Will the motivation be associated with a uniquely clear revelation of the cross, what the Son of God accomplished there, and what it cost Him to save the world? Or will it be the quintessential appeal of fear inspired by the most terrorism-sounding message of all time? “The third angel’s message in verity” appears on the surface to be the latter.

Just when your weary, fearful heart is longing for some refreshing good news, then you bump into the most terrifying, blood-curdling news in the entire Bible: the third angel’s message (Rev. 14:9-11). Or so it seems on the surface. Utterly new in world history, it’s “the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of His indignation,” that is, not a shred of mercy mixed in with it. Always, the wrath of God has been mixed with mercy—a little hope or kindness included. Why this unprecedented horror?

³ *The Great Controversy*, p. 36.

Seriously, what human sin will be so bad that it merits such an apparent temper tantrum on the part of God?

And why do “the holy angels” and even “the Lamb” seem apparently to enjoy watching these unfortunate mark-of-the-beast people sizzle and roast in human agony? The third angel’s message says these lost souls “shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in [their] presence.” Understand it as figuratively as you like, it still seems to come through as unalloyed bad news. The worst part: our meek and lowly, precious Jesus seems to enjoy watching this horror “in [His] presence,” like the principals in the Spanish Inquisition dressing up their finest to watch the heretics burn alive in “their presence.”

And yet our favorite author tells us that “the third angel’s message in verity” is the “most precious” Good News ever sounded—a clearer understanding of justification by faith—just what your fearful, weary heart hungers for. And just what the world is dying to hear!

The people in Key West Florida had been warned: Hurricane George was coming straight at them and it was bad. Now was the time to pack up and head over the causeway to the mainland. But many chose to disobey the evacuation order and stayed. They were fortunate; but they had a narrow escape. The storm was indeed bad. Pictures show two-story houses turned on their side. It was a vicious storm.

The God of heaven is warning the world of a vicious storm that is headed straight for us: the final battle in the great war between light and darkness,

good and evil, Christ and Satan. The Book of Revelation has been shouting the news: “If anyone worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead or in his hand, the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of His indignation . . .” (Rev. 14:9, 10). The heaven-inspired evacuation order is clear: “Come out of [Babylon], My people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues” (Rev. 18:4).

Where is there any Good News in the terrible third angel’s message of Rev. 14:9-11?

(1) The “third angel follows” the first who tells “the everlasting gospel” to the world (vss. 6, 7). Obviously then the 3rd *also* has Good News, even if we may be too blind to see it.

(2) The reason for the unprecedented wrath of God is seen in the preceding chapter: for the first time in 6000 years the world unites in a decree to slay God’s true people (Rev. 13:13-15). Any father worth his salt gets white hot if someone tries to kill his helpless children. The mark of the beast is still future; and so is this “wrath.” God will not be on a temper tantrum; His wrath will be 100% righteous, and under full control.

(3) Chapter 7 has detailed the proclamation of the seal of God message which has gone to all the world with the first and second angels’ messages (and the message of His much more abounding grace will have enlightened the earth— Rev. 18:1-4). This last message of grace has been despised and rejected by the world *before* this terrible wrath

can burst forth. The “beast” who plans to enforce the death decree will marshal the world to repeat the sin of crucifying Christ—this time in the person of His saints—what a response to His much more abounding grace! The Father forgave the world for crucifying His Son the first time; the second? Don’t play games with Him.

(4) This message is Good News because it tells the world there’s no need for even one person to get ensnared in Satan’s clever counterfeit of the gospel—the mark of the beast. For the first time in world history, “all men” will be fully cognizant of the issues in the great controversy. And therein is the Good News—salvation from that wrath.

(5) The Greek of the expression “in the presence of” means that those who worship the beast will have to look into the eyes of the Lamb (*en opion*, literally, before the eyes of). There is no Centigrade or Fahrenheit fire hot enough to equal the anguish of those who at last look into the eyes of the Son of God and know at last He died their second death, and whose love they have cruelly despised. No, Christ and the angels will not enjoy their anguish. He wants you to know all about it now.

When the Key West people enjoyed the balmy sunshine and blue skies prior to the hurricane, it was hard to imagine that something so terrible could happen to them as that the eye of the hurricane should pass right over them. It may be more difficult for us to imagine the nature of the spiritual storm that is brewing for us. That “mark of the beast” is going to be the most subtle, powerful inducement to sin that mankind have ever known. It

will involve the final, irrevocable choice to revolt against God. It will come in the form of a counterfeit gospel, a counterfeit message of righteousness by faith so powerfully deceptive that “insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect” (Mt. 24:24). And it will be the final exam; no re-takes possible.

Judas Iscariot couldn’t endure; the apostle Peter almost lost his soul; all of the apostles got an F grade for bravery. What’s important in the final test is not our own salvation, but whether or not we will honor Christ in the desperate hour when He will need us most. There will be a people who *do* endure! Where’s the Good News? There is still time to prepare!

The apostle John writes his Gospel after Matthew, Mark and Luke had finished. He dared to voice an equation that no other apostle could rise to say: “God is *agape*.” John labors to represent the wrath of God as consistent with that totally unique character. He represents the Father as condemning no man but as “committing all judgment unto the Son . . . because He is the Son of man,” humanity’s Peer (John 5:22, 27). Those who “believe not” must come up in the second resurrection (which is as much “in Christ” as is the first, 1 Cor. 15:22), because their uncoerced unanimous vote is essential in bringing to a close the great controversy between Christ and Satan (Rev. 5:13; 15:4).

And even though all judgment is “committed” to Christ, He Himself forswears the privilege of pronouncing it concerning the lost, saying that He

will not “condemn” any nonbeliever “in the last day.” “If any man hear My words, and believe not, I judge [condemn] him not: for I came not to judge condemn the world, but to save the world” (John 12:47, 48).

In apparent contradiction to this plain statement are several others that indicate that He will speak words of most severe condemnation to those who at last realize how they have neglected Him in the person of the poor, the hungry, those in prison. “I never knew you: depart from Me, ye that work iniquity” (Mt. 25:41-46; 7:23) are the words that He will apparently thunder at them.

The problem is resolved as He explains how the lost will be condemned. “He that rejecteth Me, and receiveth not My words, hath one that judgeth [condemns, present and future tense alike] him: the word that I have spoken shall judge [condemn] him in the last day” (John 12:48). Those who have neglected Christ in the person of the poor have a memory made painfully distinct in the final assize before the Great White Throne when “the books [are] opened. . . and the [resurrected] dead [are] judged out of those things which were written in the books according to their works” (Rev. 20:12).

The Son of God does not need to say a word to them. They look in His eyes,⁴ and that is enough.

⁴ “As soon as the books of record are opened, and the eye of Jesus looks upon the wicked, they are conscious of every sin which they have ever committed. They see just where their feet diverged from the path of purity and holiness, just how far pride and rebellion have carried them in the violation of the law of God. The seductive temptations which they

No Fahrenheit or Centigrade heat could register the degree of pain that they will sense when “the word that He has spoken shall judge [condemn]” them in that “last day.” Will the functioning agent be the law, speaking thus? Yes, the wicked will painfully remember all their violations of the law. But what causes the law to come alive to them when for so long they have blacked it out? If looking in the eye of Christ arouses their pain at remembering what He “has spoken,” it must be the Holy Spirit who activates the law to make conviction become lethal.

In that “day,” will Christ be angry? There is no wrath in the universe as terrible as “the wrath of the Lamb.” He freely forgave those who crucified Him the first time; but when they attempt to “crucify Him afresh” in the person of His saints, His wrath will burst forth uninhibited. A healthy common sense today motivates every sane person to want to avoid that piercing eye of the Son of God when He detects unforgiven rebellion cherished in the hearts of the resurrected unbelievers.

To “believe not” is more than passive, nonchalant unbelief. It requires the outlay of energy involved in rejecting evidence, in stifling conviction, in repeated choices to choose darkness in the face of almost

encouraged by indulgence in sin, the blessings perverted, the messengers of God despised, the warnings rejected, the waves of mercy beaten back by the stubborn, unrepentant heart—all appear as if written in letters of fire.

Above the throne is revealed the cross; and like a panoramic view appear the scenes of Adam's temptation and fall, and the successive steps in the great plan of redemption.” *The Great Controversy*, p. 666.

blinding light. It involves rejecting “the heavenly gift” of the Holy Spirit of which one was once a “partaker,” and eschewing “the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come” (Heb. 6:4, 5). It’s hard work which enlists one’s whole soul in rebellion against the *agape* which is God Himself.

It’s not a selfish “wrath” that moves God; it’s total concern for the life of the universe. All infinity is therefore involved in that holy wrath, and the redeemed and the unfallen intelligences of the universe will be sharing in it by total agreement. God being infinite, His wrath will be infinite; but the universe will concur in its judgment.

The blazing hot intensity of that final divine wrath is almost unbelievable for us humans to contemplate. Its pent-up fires have been blazing quietly, unseen as in a dormant volcano. The incredible evil of torturing and murdering the Son of God, the constant beating off of the *agape*-motivated pleadings of the Holy Spirit, the blasphemous willingness to crucify the Son of God all over again in the person of His saints—beware that holy wrath when finally aroused.

And let us “saints” tremble. Over one hundred times Ellen White was moved to declare that “our” sin in resisting, condemning and “in a great measure” rejecting the “beginning” of the loud cry message has been identical to that of the Jews in rejecting and crucifying their Christ. The concentrated light of the ages was implicit in that message God revealed to us over a century ago; to repeat that sin of the Jews, as Ellen White some hundred times said “we” did, is horrendous guilt.

Well might we as Seventh-day Adventist shepherds of the flock tremble; with Paul we too “know therefore the terror of the Lord.”

A healthy sense of anticipation befits all who serve as leaders of any kind in the remnant church. No other people in world history have been privileged to see truth as have we. To fulfill Ellen White’s description of our brethren who “despised” and “hated” the message will place us in the most unenviable position any will ever know in the final divine judgment. None of the tyrants of history, nor even Reformers, saw the “light” that was blazing on our path. Seated in the little wooden church in Minneapolis, “we” out-sinned them all.

That final divine wrath will be as fully *agape* as was the sacrifice of Christ. We may seek to draw fine lines of distinction between what Christ suffered and what the lost will suffer, but attempts to be more precise than is Scripture can only confuse people and in the process limit the ministry of reconciliation. But the final soul-winning message will convey to the heart of the sinner the profound realization that whatever suffering the lost will know has been already suffered in his behalf by the Son of God at His cross. Christ died for him; therefore Christ drank most fully of the “cup” that anyone can ever drink. When the sinner with an ounce of honesty in his soul can be brought to realize this, his heart is moved; he will be “drawn” all the way to repentance unless he “resists” that message of much more abounding grace.

The evangelistic message, “Be ye reconciled to God” could also include, “Be ye reconciled to the

unanimous verdict of the redeemed and of the unfallen universe.” The “enmity against God” which has always characterized fallen human beings can be changed to reconciliation with God. Presenting to the sinner the truth of that final “wrath” will contribute to that soul-winning reconciliation.

How does the cleansing of the sanctuary relate to the final wrath of God? The cosmic Day of Atonement sees two antithetical movements develop side by side: hearts moved by the *agape* of the Lamb of God (the Hero of the Book of Revelation), becoming fully reconciled to Him; at the same time other hearts not so moved become implacably hostile to Him, seeking to attack Him in the person of His saints (the mark of the beast issue). The first must precede the second. The latter will trigger that fiercest divine wrath.

Doubtless the wicked who are resurrected would want to take their own resurrection-given-life (a short-cut to Nirvana would be wonderful). But they can't. Only one Person has ever been able to “lay down His [eternal] life” (as well as take it up again; John 15:13 speaks of this temporal, not eternal, life). We can cut short our temporal life by suicide, but when the lost are resurrected “in Christ” they cannot on their own destroy that God restored life.

Only the Infinite Giver can do so; and when He does, it will be an act as distinctly *agape* as was His act of salvation which they have always despised.

Does God “harden” some people’s hearts so they cannot believe? Does He “fit” some people for “destruction”? Did He “harden Pharaoh’s heart”? Ten times we read that Pharaoh *hardened* his

heart; he could have died of heart disease had he not perished by drowning. For Pharaoh, the more light God shed upon his pathway, the more he hardened his own heart. There are ten Bible texts that say Pharaoh “hardened his own heart.” And there are ten that say “God hardened his heart.”

Contradiction? No; it’s the metaphor of the clay: the more sunlight shines upon it, the harder it gets. Until we “let” the Holy Spirit give us a “new heart,” the more light the Lord shines upon us, the more we harden these poor sinful, selfish hearts. The Good News? You can pray the prayer that is 100% sure to be answered: ask for a tender, melted, broken heart (Ps. 51:10, 17). Oh, friends: kneeling alone before the Lord and letting the tears of repentance fall, is wonderfully good treatment for a hard heart! Hard hearts can cause hard arteries. Know what it means to let self be melted before the Lord. Let Him put His arms around you.

The answer will come through understanding, appreciating, what happened on Christ’s cross.