

## THE BIBLICAL METAPHORS

"The wrath of God is like great waters that are damned for the present" (from Johnathan Edwards' sermon "In the hands of an angry God"). With this image of tidal waves of power, Edwards creates a God who is more than a force of nature. The sins of the unconverted continually increase the wrath of God, and as the wrath (i.e. the water) increase so does the potential damage done. Obviously, a trickle of God's wrath would cause less destruction than a tidal wave, and God controls His anger until it reaches such a huge volume that it must be released. (NCSU)

The term "metaphor" refers to speech that uses figurative language to communicate concepts in a memorable manner. Metaphors allow the expression of the nuances of emotions, experiences, images, etc for which no standard, specific vocabulary exists. There are a number of biblical metaphors that have become standards for expressing concepts in our language. Metaphors allow writers to present or summarize a very complex idea that is developed throughout part or all of the text. By utilizing metaphorical language in the Bible God communicates the spiritual terms and concepts in a manner that remains etched in the memory of the readers.

Metaphorical references regarding the anger of God are used to "prick" sincere hearts and prod mankind to secure eternal life through respect and reverence to the divine commands. The metaphorical terms describing God's angry wrath are emotionally weighty.

It is tragic that the Postmodernist/Progressive/Liberal takes the biblical metaphors and removes the power that Inspiration intended to impact mankind for repentance and restoration to God. This position is well summarized in this honest statement by one not ashamed to identify himself as a "progressive":

Atheists and fundamentalists each tend to read the Bible in the same wooden, overly literalistic manner. The difference is that atheists reject what they read in that manner, while fundamentalists believe it...That observation has resonated with many people – including many fundamentalists who are honest with themselves and who rightly contend that they don't read "all of the Bible literally"...I give greatest weight to Mark, Luke, Matthew, John (in that order), certain letters that Paul actually wrote (as opposed to the Pastoral Epistles which he didn't), the Prophets, and the Psalms. I interpret the other books of the Bible according to how they jibe and are in sync with these primary texts. Many progressive Christians refer to themselves as "Matthew 25 Christians" (referring to the test for who Jesus says is in or isn't in the Kingdom by what they do or don't do), "Sermon on the Mount Christians" (stressing their seeking to prioritize those teachings as central); or as "Red Letter Christians" (indicating that they give greatest weight to the words attributed to Jesus) (Wolsey).

And another amazing comment on the biblical metaphors reads...

Liberal Christians are always telling me that God didn't really mean this or that Jesus didn't really mean that. Those parts of the Bible are metaphors and only atheists and the small minority of about 48% of Christians takes that part literally. Real Christians of course understand the Truth and that is the entire Bible is to be taken metaphorically except for the existence of God, some of Jesus's magic tricks, his resurrection, and anything else liberal Christians want to believe really happened. Maybe we should take this whole "metaphorical" thing one step further and just admit that maybe, possible, probably, almost certainly, God is a metaphor too. Maybe the whole thing is fictional and each of the unknown number of anonymous authors had their own agendas and metaphors they were trying to convey and there wasn't a single narrative at all. Maybe Jesus was a metaphor too (Rosch).

The insurmountable problem with viewing all of the Bible's writings as "metaphorical" (figurative and not literal) is that such removes the entire content of the Bible from any reasoned application because the interpretation depends upon each reader's feelings as to how the text applies and what lesson is taught. Consequently everything in the Bible is to be viewed figuratively and nothing literal. By viewing all of the Bible

as metaphorical the Bible's teachings become worthless as a governing authority. It is a good literary work but no more binding than any other literary masterpieces. This inevitability has led some to the above position that even God and Christ Jesus are not literal but are metaphorical word images!

Thus by using the Postmodernist metaphorical torture of words the Bible has been reduced to the level of mortal literature and its commands, concepts and conventions are mere suggestions that are equal in authority with Mark Twain, Shakespeare, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides! The Postmodernist has achieved his goal of replacing the Almighty God with mortal man. Man has become the measure of himself!

The use of metaphorical language in the Bible is a critical method of communicating God's truth to mankind. Through metaphors Inspiration teaches complex spiritual concepts that are essential to mankind's peace and contentment on earth and when obeyed assures peace and happiness throughout eternity in heaven.

There are basic interpretative principles for metaphorical language. Bullinger's classic work makes these concise observations on the metaphors of the Bible. The metaphors of the Bible "boldly and warmly declare that one thing IS the other. The Metaphor is not so true to *fact* as the Simile, but is much truer to *feeling*. By using metaphors to describe the anger of God, Inspiration sought to communicate the most intense feelings associated with the wrath of God. The metaphors applied to God's anger are descriptive of the greatest possible pain because that is the result of God's anger. God's anger is pain-filled it is not pain-less.

The principles for an honest interpretation of metaphorical language are summarized by Dungan:

- ✓ Let the author give his own interpretation.
- ✓ The interpretation should be consistent with the immediate and distant context.
- ✓ Compare the figurative with the literal accounts to find harmony in meaning.
- ✓ Facts of history (real life experiences) should be used in ascertaining the meaning.
- ✓ If use is made by the inspired authors in other texts then that is the proper interpretation.
- ✓ Do not demand too many points of analogy.

When the biblical metaphors regarding God's anger are examined we discover terms and concepts that provoke strong motivation to submit to God's commands so we will escape the horrors of blasphemous disobedience.

### *"Fire"*

The concept of fire is the metaphor most commonly used by Inspiration to communicate God's punishing wrath. Perhaps no other experience in earthly living brings such an intense pain and suffering as fire. This metaphor communicates to man's mind the most intense and persistent pain that a human can experience.

Throughout the Old Testament narrative fire was associated with the consequences of disobedience. Some of the most familiar are the fire fell on Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24); was sent as part of the plagues upon Egypt (Exodus 9:23); consumed the blasphemers Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:3); and the grumblers (Numbers 11:1).

The metaphorical messaging of fire as tormenting punishment is also found in the New Testament. Fire is used to describe God's angry punishment toward those who do not do good works (Matthew 3:10; 7:19; 25:41; John 15:6); those who are disobedient (Matthew 3:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:7; 2 Peter 3:7; Jude 7; Revelation 14:10; 16:8; 17:16); the final destiny of those disobedient to God and living in the world but not using their earthly lives to honor God (Matthew 13:40, 42, 50); those who do not choose self-control but live addicted to personal sins (Matthew 18:9; Hebrews 10:27). The fire of judgment is a holy and righteous punishment upon all who turn away from God as it is portrayed as originating in the altar of God's Presence (Revelation 8:5). God's holy "fire" vindicates those who are steadfast in their loyalty and attitude even though they are scorned and scoffed by the worldly (Revelation 11:5; 20:9).

"Fire has the same metaphorical import than any other word in Scriptures. It is a good servant and a cruel master. But its only Scriptural use is in view of its burning. It is never the symbol of blessing" (Dungan).

See these texts for Inspiration's additional comments on the fiery anger of God: Psalm 21:9; Isaiah 30:27; Zephaniah 1:18; 3:8; Malachi 4:3.

The metaphorical term "lake of fire" (Revelation 19:20; 20:10, 14, 15; 21:8) offers the clearest messaging on the pain that comes from God's anger toward those whose attitudes, actions, and lifestyle choices are blasphemous rejections of God's commands. The term "lake of fire" stresses the vastness of God's punishing anger. It is not a single instance; a simple burn. It speaks of an intense all consuming; completely enveloping and overwhelming pain. There is no metaphor that can communicate the devastating and eternal agony any better than being in a "lake of life."

### *"Pouring out the cup of wrath"*

This metaphorical phrase speaks of the anger of God being kept until time for punishment arrives (Revelation 14:10; 16:19). Adding to this image is the statement that God's anger was "unmixed." This refers to the practices of diluting concentrated portions of the boiled grape syrup. This syrup was so concentrated that to drink it in its unmixed state was distasteful. The concentrated substance was very strong. Such fittingly describes the anger of God toward the selfish Postmodernist/Progressive/Liberal. The message communicated is that the rebellious and stubborn will face the strongest possible wrath.

The imagery of this concentrated wrath is further heightened with the comment that the unmixed contents of the cup are "poured out." The wrath is completely emptied. This wrath is described as "fierce."

The message is clear. Those who fail to submit and obey completely will face the full wrath of the Almighty God. They will not face a portion of that wrath but its full fierce force! Those who had once committed loyalty to God and promised to serve Him faithfully but turned away from God and toward their own pleasures will join those who evilly rejected the invitation to be saved from sins (Revelation 16:19). Together these are joined by blasphemy as they rejected God for Self. Together these are described by Inspiration as "Men were scorched with fierce heat; and they blasphemed the name of God...and did not repent so as to give Him glory and a loud voice came out of the temple from the throne, saying, "It is done"...and was remembered before God, to give the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath...and men blasphemed God" (Revelation 6-20).

How tragic that such a strong metaphor is casually shrugged off by many whose lifestyle choices will place them into this damned group. They await the full, unmixed wrath of God but they are so deluded they do not recognize their doom.

### *"Slippery places"*

This metaphor speaks of the instability in the lives of the God-less. These have rejected the stability of God's clear commands and followed the insecurity of a lifestyle devoted to Satan. These think if only they can gain a greater intensity in physical pleasure then they will be happy. So they allow their souls to become slaves to sin. They gain a small amount of pleasure but it is unsatisfying so they increase the behavior that they are trying to use to find satisfaction (narcotics, alcohol, chemical drugs, sexual deviancy, financial pursuits, etc). But these are only the "passing pleasures of sin" (Hebrews 11:25) and their satisfaction is momentary and then the slave to sin has to find a greater level. Sadly this failure to submit to God's commands and the rejection of God's Presence leaves one with only the resources of the world to satisfy the basic yearnings of stability and security.

The anger of God brings only instability, a deep emptiness of the soul's satisfaction and restlessness in earthly existence. Such is a tragic life spent in total waste as illustrated by the Wasteful Son in Luke 15. God's anger seeks to warn mankind away from such tragedy with the metaphor used in these texts: "Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction" (Psalm 73:18). And, "Their foot shall slide in due time" (Deuteronomy 32:35).

### *"Furnace"*

This is connected with the metaphor of "fire" (above). The designation of a furnace in which the angry wrath of God is confined shows that God's anger is at the greatest possible intensity. The narrative of Daniel 3:15-23 explains the messaging of this metaphor. Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego were cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire and no one could deliver them. The King's punishment upon these three was meted because he was "filled with wrath" (verse 19). The furnace was heated seven times more than usual. The furnace was so hot that the flame of the fire killed those men who threw Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego into the furnace.

The anger of God will consign the godless to a furnace. His anger is not capricious or arrogant as Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3. God's anger is righteous and is meted to those who have been given ample opportunities and provided with detailed instructions as to how to avoid this "furnace" of God's anger. The divine patience has been long suffering *"not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance"* (2 Peter 3:3-9).

The metaphor of this "furnace" of God's wrath is found in Isaiah 31:9; Ezekiel 22:20; Malachi 4:1; Matthew 13:42, 50; Revelation 9:2. The metaphorical messaging cannot be missed: *"As they gather silver and bronze and iron and lead and tin into the furnace to blow fire on it in order to melt it, so I will gather you in My anger and in My wrath and I will lay you there and melt you."* (Ezekiel 22:20).

It is incredulous to know that some willingly choose this destiny as they seek worldly pleasures and satisfaction rather than live within the boundaries of God's revealed commands.

### ***"Darkness"***

This metaphor communicates dreaded, helplessness, and despair. Darkness is consistently used in Scripture as the antithesis of God. This metaphor is especially applicable to the Postmodernist who strives to doublespeak and elevate humanity's achievements as qualifying him to be the sovereign authority (Isaiah 5:20, "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness").

Total darkness deprives mankind of the security of his senses. He is without any assurance. The total fright that results is demonstrated in the child whose screams at night because he is fearful of the dark.

Tragically those who rebel against and reject the Almighty God will be consigned to the emotional terrors that are found in "pitch-black" conditions. The fear leads to moaning and crying. The feelings of helplessness, dread and despair are expressed by the tortured cries and moans. There is no reprieve for these feelings. Gone will be the hope of comfort. Gone will be the offer for happiness. All that will be available is an eternity of the emotional terrors that arise when "darkness" engulfs the person.

The outer darkness is a place referred to three times in the Gospel of Matthew (8:12, 22:13, and 25:30) into which a person may be "cast out", and where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth." This metaphor enlarges the messaging that God's anger consigns the lost to "darkness." The explanatory term "outer" further explains the hopeless of those who refuse to comply with God. There will be great sorrow, loss and woe. Those in this outer darkness are in contrast to those in the brightly lit and joyous environment offered to those who obeyed God and remained faithful to His conditions (Revelation 22:5).

The "outer darkness" in Matthew is called the "blackest darkness" in Jude 13 and is reserved for the godless (Jude 4).

Darkness is used as a biblical symbol of moral depravity (Psalm 82:5; Proverbs 2:13; Romans 3:12). Darkness also refers to trouble, affliction, death and nothingness (Job 5:12; Proverbs 20:20; Isaiah 9:2; 1 Samuel 2:9; Ecclesiastes 11:8; Job 3:4-6). These texts offer the message that this is what the unbeliever, the reprobate, the blasphemer, or the erring Christian can expect from God's anger. These have rejected the holy hope and trusted in their delusion that they can despise the Scripture and evade punishment.

Such is a delusional belief. These have denied God, hated the truth and treated God casually. The only prospect for their eternity is a "weeping and gnashing of teeth." These suffer on earth, but their earthly

torment is the best that they have to anticipate. The word “weeping” describes an inner pain of the heart, mind, and soul; a wailing or lamentation by beating the breast in an expression of immense sorrow. The phrase “gnashing of teeth” describes an action that comes from intense pain to the body. Taken together, the weeping and gnashing of teeth affirms this place of “outer darkness” is an indescribable spiritual agony and unending physical pain.

The outer darkness is a place of anguish, heartache, grief, and unspeakable suffering. This is the eternity of all who reject Christ (John 3:18, 36). And this tragic eternity was chosen! Perhaps an even greater tragedy is that some were aware of this eternal fate and remained silent rather than urging repentance and restoration!

### *“Where the worm does not die”*

This metaphor speaks to the emotions as it details the horrors of God’s punishment. Several associations with this image illustrate the deplorable condition that awaits those who are the objects of God’s anger. All are very familiar with the maggot that feeds upon the decaying host. There are two main sources for this metaphor. Isaiah 66:24 frames it as maggots feeding off dead bodies that have transgressed God’s commands. Mark 9:43-48 frames the metaphor in describing the eternal doom of those who did not honor God’s commands.

In both references (Isaiah and Mark) Inspiration seeks to present the eternal environment of the disobedient in the worst possible image. The image that is presented combines the greatest personal dishonor (the failure of giving the physical body a proper burial) and the most revolting situation (the frenzy feeding of maggots on decaying flesh and the nauseating smell that is overwhelming). In Mark’s text we observe that the Lord added reference to the “unquenchable fire.” This adds emphasis to the horrific situation. Not only is there shame, dishonor, putrid stench, but there is the fact that such is “unquenchable”—it will never change.

It is this kind of putrid environment that is metaphoric of the environment of those consigned to Hell. This is what the unbeliever and the reprobate believer have to anticipate because they are the objects of God’s anger. Why would one not be motivated to turn to God and avoid this eternal environment? Why would one choose to continue a lifestyle that chooses to reject God when this is the future?

### *“Thirst”*

Thirst is a natural physiological need that provides an excellent teaching metaphor. It is an image that communicates intense yearnings and emphasizes man’s inadequacies.

In the Bible this is a metaphor that is used to describe the blessings of obedience. Those who are obedient will “never thirst again” (John 4:13-15). Thirst is also used as a metaphor describing the constant yearning for spirituality that is promised satisfaction (Matthew 5:6).

Just as thirst identifies the yearning and satisfaction of the righteous, it is used to portray the tragic condition of those who never knew God or who knew Him but turned away from His way of satisfaction to their way of misery. Jeremiah observes this tragic lifestyle in the lives of those who claimed to follow God but failed to find satisfaction: “My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water” (2:13).

Perhaps the greatest use of this metaphor is found in Luke 16:24 where Dives is so tormented that he begs for just one drop of water to “cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.” That request was denied because the Rich Man had rejected multiple opportunities to turn to God and follow the divine directions.

The metaphor of man’s “thirst” emphasizes the provisions of God and the insufficiencies of mankind. God offers mankind the “water of life” that satisfies the soul. This is offered as “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost” (Revelation 22:17). But there are those who insult this invitation. They choose to forsake the living waters and try to find satisfaction in “broken cisterns.” They will join Dives in Torments and throughout eternity will cry for just one drop of water.

### *“The Winepress of God’s wrath”*

The metaphorical image of the winepress is found throughout Scripture as symbolizing the action of the angry wrath of Jehovah God. A winepress, wine vat, is a cavity carved out of rock or built artificially. Ripe grapes are placed in the winepress and trampled underfoot, with the juice flowing down into a lower receptacle. Usually, a full winepress signifies prosperity, while an empty winepress signifies famine. The grapes were crushed with force and destroyed except for their juice which flowed into a lower cavity and then placed into jars.

The metaphorical reference of the winepress symbolizes the punishment and justice that is now being judged upon evil. As the metaphorical winepress is trodden the image messaging is that there is utter defeat and absolute authority presented. The righteous Almighty God reigns and those who reject His commands are crushed. Here are a few of the more familiar texts where the word "winepress" is used metaphorically to depict God's judgment:

Isaiah 63:2-3—"I have trodden the wine trough alone, and from the peoples there was no man with Me. I also trod them in My anger and trampled them in My wrath; and their lifeblood is sprinkled on My garments, And I stained all My raiment." Continue reading through verse 6 to gain the full image of God's angry judgment.

Lamentations 1:15—"The Lord has trodden as in a wine press the virgin daughter of Judah."

Joel 3:13, 14—"Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, tread, for the wine press is full; the vats overflow, for their wickedness is great. Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision." Note the connection between the individual's decision and the punishment from God's anger.

Revelation 14:19—"So the angel swung his sickle to the earth and gathered the clusters from the vine of the earth, and threw them into the great wine press of the wrath of God." Revelation 19:15—"He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty."

Note: The closing chapters of the Bible bring an emphatic focus upon the judgment stemming from God's anger. In Revelation 14 Inspiration points out that the climax of the grape harvest was the juice that flowed from the smashed grape. In a similar manner the climax of the anger of God is seen as the enemies of God are smashed and their blood flows. They have rejected the only hope of salvation and so must choose the fury that comes from God's anger.

The metaphor of the winepress in Revelation 19 portrays the subjection of humanity to God. Within this section the biblical text writes with urgency to warn its readers not to anger the Almighty God. The Winepress is paired with the metaphor of a sacrifice. These are not descriptions of literal events, but the word images that need to be accepted by mankind so he will avoid tragedy at the Judgment.

### *"A violent oppressor"*

The Book of Lamentations was written to a nation that had exchanged its loyalty to Jehovah God for a self-serving arrogance. The fall of Jerusalem resulted because of God's anger at Judah's blasphemy. The nation had become callous to the Almighty God. The citizenry had a practice of religion but lacked any sincere commitment. Such ignited the anger of God and Jerusalem was conquered.

Jeremiah wrote the Lamentations as a eulogy to the fallen nation. The prophet's words describe God metaphorically as a violent oppressor who has brought destruction upon the city and its people. In a study on the metaphorical portrayal of God in Lamentations as "a violent oppressor" this observation was made. "This image of God as a violent destroyer is one of the most confronting in Lamentations. In varying degrees, three of the personae speak directly of God's violence; the narrator, the man, and Daughter Zion" (Boase).

This metaphor and its context have a clear application to the Postmodern Period. Today's civilization finds itself in an identical setting as Judah.

Look at the Lamentations of Jeremiah and observed how God's anger brought tragedy.

- ✓ God's judgment multiplies mourning and lamentation (2:4, 5).

- ✓ God's anger and wrath are referenced six times (2: 1, 3, 6). Adding emphasis are the words "fierce" and "indignation."
- ✓ God is described as acting without mercy (2:2). Over thirty verbs are attributed to God stating that God has thrown down, breaks down, brings down, and cuts down.
- ✓ The people have turned from God so they will not find God's support when enemies threaten their security (2:3-5). Instead of being portrayed as a source of help God is described as acting like an enemy, destroying the city and killing the pride of the nation. These are holy war images, portraying the wrath that comes when God's anger is "kindled."
- ✓ The ferocious destruction was intentional and a deliberated move by God (2:8).

As Lamentations chapter two closes the reader is left with no doubt as to the cause of the destruction. It is God who has brought about the devastation. There is a feeling of overwhelming energy by the number of violent verbs attributed to God.

This sorrowful summary records the tragedy that occurred because God had been rejected and His grace and mercy were casually treated. Although greatly blessed those in the context of Lamentations hold only a shattered hope because they had rejected God's grace and received God's wrath (3:17-18).

This metaphor of God's anger ought to prod modern readers to avoid the same mistakes that ancient Judah did. Will the modern reader admit and accept the anger of God so he does not confess this catastrophe: "Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, Which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger" (Lamentations 1:12; read also 3:1-18).

### **Absolute Take Aways from This Study**

*First, God's anger cannot be erased by claiming the metaphorical images are invalid.* The metaphors of the Bible added to the reality of God's anger.

*Second, biblical metaphors communicate that God's anger is beyond the worst possible pains and torments known in earthly life.* The strongest images are selected to prod mankind to accept the anger of God a a reality.

*Third, when one understands and accepts the reality of God's anger he should feel a dreaded fear and immediately do whatever he can to escape the wrath that is to come.* The only action that will allow us to escape is turning in obedient faith to Christ Jesus. "Wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come" (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

## **HAVE YOU BEEN RESCUED FROM THE WRATH THAT IS COMING?**

### **Sources Cited**

Lesson Five: The Biblical Metaphors (in final MSS will be at end with other citations)

See this page for guidance on MLA website citations: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/08/>

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