

CAN BELIEVERS EXPERIENCE THE WRATH OF GOD?

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I. INTRODUCTION

Serious Bible teachers and students understand the importance when it comes to clarifying God's Word. Yet, how serious and clear are we when it comes to understanding God's message of wrath? Unfortunately, many Christians assume that whenever the expression "God's wrath" appears in the Bible it usually means eternal judgment that falls only upon the unregenerate (Rom 1:18–3:20).¹ This common interpretation surfaces two questions that will be answered in this article: "Do the Scriptures reveal the subject of God's wrath to be temporal in nature² and

¹ An informal experiment conducted by this writer while teaching at Trinity International University found that nine out of ten Christians automatically consented to a definition of "God's wrath" to usually mean "eternal-judgment."

² Many passages in the Scriptures are understood by theologians to be speaking of eternal wrath. Unfortunately, space does not allow a full treatment of all the biblical passages where God's wrath is found. Hence, the aim of this article is not to disprove whether God's wrath is ever eternal, but to prove whether wrath appears temporally in the OT and NT, and can it apply equally to unbelievers and sinning believers. However, out of all of the OT and NT passages researched by this writer, only two passages in the OT seem to imply eternal punishment: Malachi 1:4 mentions, "Even though Edom has said...the LORD will have indignation forever" (עַד-עוֹלָם). This term means more of "a duration of indefinite but not necessarily infinite length [eternal] (see 1 Sam 27:12, where 'lifetime' is the meaning; Gen 49:26, where 'long-enduring' is the meaning)," Douglas Stuart, "Malachi," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary, Volume 3, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 1289-90. Amos 1:11 also says, "He kept his wrath forever" (NKJV). Not only is God not the subject of this wrath, but also the Hebrew word here must

does God’s wrath fall equally on sinning believers as well as unbelievers?” The Greek word for “wrath” (ὀργή), with God as its executor, appears in Romans far more than any other NT book. Because Romans is written to Christians (1:7, 15), it will be vital to examine each passage where wrath appears in the epistle in order to meet this article’s objective. But first, it will be necessary to survey the OT and NT occurrences (outside of Romans) in order to see whether God’s wrath is temporal in nature and whether it falls equally upon sinning believers as well as unbelievers.

II. GOD’S WRATH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Septuagint translates the Hebrew words עִבְרָה, אָסָה, קִצְּפוּ, and יָרַח³ with the Greek words ὀργή and θυμός. Sometimes a combination of both is used (Deut 9:19). Although there are four Hebrew words translated as “wrath” and/or “anger” in the English translations, אָסָה is the most common.⁴

In the OT, God’s wrath is poured out against sinning nations and even His own people, Israel. First, the unbelieving nations and their kings are objects of God’s temporal wrath. This is a concept that permeates the OT (Isa 13:9, 13; 30:27; 59:18-19; 63:6; Jer 50:13; 51:45; Ezek 25:14; Jonah 3:9; Ps 2:5; 110:5; Mal 1:4).

Second, and more pervasive than the previous, is how Israel appears as the object of God’s temporal wrath (Num 12:9; Deut 4:25; 28:15; Judg 2:14; 2 Sam 24:1; Ps 60:1; Amos 3:2; Isa 10:5; 30:27). Also God’s wrath comes upon individual believers such as Moses (Exod 4:24; Deut 1:37; 4:26). The fact that Moses appeared at the Mount of Transfiguration with Elijah and was speaking with Jesus leaves no question that he was

mean “continually” (NIV), because it is Edom who unrelentingly pursues his brother Israel with wrath. Thus, a continual pursuit by Edom to destroy Israel is the meaning.

³ There are 14 Hebrew words in the OT that the LXX translates ὀργή (wrath) or θυμός (anger). See Edwin Hatch and Henry Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and Other Greek Literature (Including the Apocryphal Books)* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 1008.

⁴ G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), 210, 322.

regenerate (cf. Matt 17:1-3). However, when he sinned, God's wrath fell upon him. God's wrath also came upon king Rehoboam (2 Chr 12:12). When Israel and Rehoboam forsook God's law (2 Chr 12:1), God's wrath—in the form of the Egyptian army—came upon Judah and Israel (12:2-5, 9). Yet, when the king and Israel's leaders humbled themselves (2 Chr 12:6), God's wrath subsided (12:7, 12).

God's wrath in the OT falls indiscriminately upon individuals, both unregenerate and regenerate, who continually sin. However, His wrath is more evident in passages dealing with those in covenant relationship with Him (Num 25:3; 32:10; Deut 29:25; Judg 2:14, 20; Ps 78:21).⁵ Disobedience to the Mosaic Covenant (Deut 28–30) accounts for this phenomenon. Fichtner suggests that “consistent linking of nouns for wrath with Yahweh, the covenant God, is of supreme theological significance...[because it] shows that the idea of wrath is closely bound up with belief in the covenant.”⁶ Therefore, one should expect God's wrath to be unleashed against His own people, even more so than pagan nations.⁷

After briefly considering God's wrath in the OT, four characteristics seem to emerge: First, God expresses His wrath in strong personal terms (Ezek 7:8; Ps 60:3). Second, God usually expresses His wrath in two forms, through “natural agencies such as famine and pestilence”⁸ (cf. Deut 28:15-68; Amos 4:6) and through sinful men (Isa 44:28; Hab 1:6). Third, God often associates His love with His wrath (Hos 14:4). Fourth, God expresses His wrath temporally.⁹ Since His wrath always manifests

⁵ H. C. Hahn, “ὀργή” *The New International Dictionary of the New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, ed., Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1978, 1986), 108–109. Hahn goes on to say that ὀργή, is more often provoked by apostasy, unfaithfulness, and violation of God's law on the part of the covenant people Israel.

⁶ Fichtner, “ὀργή,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 5, eds., Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964-76), 396.

⁷ See also Hahn, “ὀργή,” in NIDNTT, 109, who says that it is within this “framework of covenant theology the wrath of God can be seen as an expression of rejected and wounded love. This is the deepest root of the concept of wrath, and in this light one can understand the overwhelming force of the message.”

⁸ G. H. C. MacGregor, “Concept of the Wrath of God in the New Testament,” *New Testament Studies* (January 1961): 102.

⁹ *Ibid.* It would have helped if MacGregor addressed the length and/or duration of this wrath.

itself because of sin, whether or not covenant relationship is involved, it carries with it a temporal element. That is, wrath will cease when covenant obedience is restored (Deuteronomy 28–29), and forgiveness will be seen through mercy (Hab 3:2). However, His judgment can either end upon completion of discipline (2 Chr 36:21-23) or termination of life (Josh 7:1-26; Num 25:1-18). In the OT, God’s wrath appears as His temporal displeasure against sin.

Thus, the common thread found in these four characteristics is this: God’s wrath is His displeasure against the sin of those who do not have a covenant relationship with Him (pagans), and to a greater extent against those who *do* have a covenant relationship with Him, but live in disobedience. Once sin is dealt with, wrath subsides.

III. GOD’S WRATH IN THE NT EXCLUDING ROMANS

In order to guard against formulating too simplistic a view of God’s wrath in the NT, we need to clarify three things: (1) the definition of the wrath of God; (2) whether God’s wrath falls equally on unbelievers as well as sinning believers;¹⁰ and (3) the distinct aspects of God’s wrath.

A. GOD’S WRATH DEFINED

The word ὀργή appears thirty-six times and θυμός appears eighteen times in the NT; the combination of the two appears twelve times in six verses.¹¹

¹⁰ Christ’s death does not keep believers from experiencing wrath. Weideman correctly points out one reason some argue “...against the believer suffering wrath is the doctrine of propitiation. It is argued that if Christ satisfied the wrath of God at the cross then the believer should never have to experience it. This argument, however, ignores the fact that the death of Christ is not applied limitlessly to the believer. For instance, the penalty for sin is death, both physical and spiritual. Although the penalty of spiritual death is removed from the believer, the penalty of physical death is not removed. A believer’s body must still experience physical suffering and death, the results of God’s righteous judgment upon sin which aroused His wrath. Therefore, the propitiation of Christ does not necessarily eliminate all temporal punishment under God’s wrath for the believer” (Stanley R. Weideman, “An Exegetical Study of the Wrath of God in the New Testament” [Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1978], 62).

¹¹ In NT studies some scholars think that there is no distinction between ὀργή and θυμός. However, this is questionable. One would have to say that in

Man appears as the executor of ὀργή five times, and as the executor of thymos seven times.¹² Jesus appears as the executor of ὀργή only three times,¹³ never thymos. Satan appears only once as the executor of thymos, never ὀργή.¹⁴ By far, more than any other reference, God appears as the executor directly and indirectly of ὀργή twenty-seven times.¹⁵ God also appears as the executor of θυμός ten times, directly and indirectly.¹⁶ Therefore, this evidence suggests that when speaking of wrath in the NT, God is usually at the center.

The fact that God's wrath comes as a result of sinful action can be demonstrated by numerous passages in the NT.¹⁷ The vices mentioned in Eph 5:2-5 are clearly the reason "the wrath of God comes" (in 5:6; cf. Col 3:6). In 1 Thess 2:16, Paul's reason for the present wrath is due to sin. In Rev 14:8 the statement, "she has made all nations drink of the wine of wrath of her fornication," shows the correlation of God's wrath and sin (Rev 18:3).

Interestingly, in the NT, God's wrath is toward unrighteous practice, not one's unregenerate position—evidenced by the previously mentioned

all twelve occurrences where both words appear together that NT writers are rendering it as either appositives or just being redundant. The distinction of both of these words should be retained in order to make sense when both appear. See Fichtner "ὀργή," in TDNT, 5:409, 419, 422.

¹² The references for ὀργή are Eph 4:31; Col 3:8; 1 Tim 2:8; Jas 1:19-20 and for θυμός are Luke 4:28; Acts 19:28; 2 Cor 12:20; Gal 5:20; Eph 4:31; Col 3:8; Heb 11:27.

¹³ Mark 3:5; Rev 6:16-17.

¹⁴ Rev 12:12.

¹⁵ They are the following: directly it appears in John 3:36; Rom 1:18; 2:5, 8; 3:5; Eph 5:6; Col 3:6; Heb 3:11; 4:3; Rev 11:18; 14:10; 16:19; 19:15; and indirectly it appears in Matt 3:7; Luke 3:7; 21:23; Rom 4:15; 5:9; 9:22; 12:19; 13:4-5; Eph 2:3; 1 Thess 1:10; 2:16; 5:9.

¹⁶ They are the following: directly it appears in Rev 14:10, 19; 15:1, 7, 16:1, 19; 18:3; 19:15; and indirectly it appears in Rom 2:8; 14:8.

¹⁷ C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (New York: Harper and Row, 1932), 21-22, believes God is not directly involved in unleashing wrath, but that it is "some process or effect in the objective realm of facts." He understands God's wrath to be something "impersonal." This is something difficult to sustain in light of all the NT verses that clearly point to God's ownership of wrath (see passages above). See also G. L. Borchert, "God's Wrath," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds., Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 991.

passages.¹⁸ However, even if Eph 2:3 states that the unregenerate are “by nature children of wrath,” given the context, the evidence of their actions (i.e. “walked,” “conducted,” and “lust of our flesh” [2:2-3]) are what allows Paul to properly refer to it as their nature (φύσις), which results in “wrath” (ὀργή). The disobedient actions stemming from their nature is what incurs wrath. Yet, Paul labels the cause (nature) by the effect it incurs (wrath) and comes up with the phrase “children of wrath,” as with the term “sons of disobedience.”¹⁹

In Eph 2:2-3, the close relationship of God’s wrath with sinful actions is seen between the parallel statements “children of wrath” and “sons of disobedience.” The words “children” and “sons” are parallel as well as the words “disobedience” and “wrath.” Today, nature gives way to actions, but man’s initial sin against God in the garden gave way to His fallen nature. This brought wrath and death. Thus, Stählin is correct in saying, “In the NT ὀργή is both God’s displeasure at evil, [and] His passionate resistance to every will which is set against Him.”²⁰

B. GOD’S WRATH DETERMINED

In the NT, God’s wrath falls upon the unregenerate. First Thessalonians 2:16 states that “wrath has come upon them” due to their sins (which comes as a result of rejecting Jesus). In Matt 3:7, John the Baptist addresses the wrath that came against the unbelieving Sadducees

¹⁸ If God’s wrath is always against sin, will the unregenerate sin in the lake of fire and continue to experience His wrath? If so, some might think that God’s wrath by default would have to be eternal. This would be true if “wrath” and “eternal punishment” were synonymous, but they are not. God’s wrath occurs temporally until the final ruling of eternal punishment. For example, a victim’s relative was once asked before the execution of the man who killed her brother whether she was still wrathful about the horrendous crime. She responded, “I am not angered or wrathful anymore because justice has been served. I am at peace.” Thus, God’s wrath subsides in eternity because eternal justice has been served. Sin which is not dealt with incurs God’s wrath, but sin that is dealt with subsides His wrath. All sin will have been dealt with in eternity, either by grace or law. For a distinction between “wrath” and “eternal punishment,” see Stählin, “ὀργή,” in TDNT, 5:434.

¹⁹ Paul is using an idiomatic Hebrew figure of speech denoting the essence of a person’s character. See E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), 504, 832-33.

²⁰ Stählin, “ὀργή,” in TDNT, 5:446.

by calling them a “brood of vipers!” In addition, John 3:36 points to unbelief as the reason why God’s wrath persists.²¹

God’s wrath also falls upon the regenerate, as one can reasonably argue from Heb 3:11 and 4:3. In Heb 3:7-15, the writer exhorts the Hebrew Christians by quoting from Ps 95:7-11. This is an appropriate worship psalm for this occasion. The author’s audience is on the verge of leaving the Christian worship system (cf. 10:25) and returning to Judaism.²² Three clues give evidence to the fact that these were Hebrew Christians.

First, “brethren” points to fellow Christians. It is true that “brethren” may be used to refer to Jews in an ethnic manner. Peter’s address in Acts 2:29, “Men and brethren, let me speak freely” is such a case (see Rom 9:3). Mark refers to Jesus’ brothers in an organic sense (3:31). However, in Heb 3:1, the author calls them “holy brethren,” not just “brethren.” These are two common terms, when used in combination, which refer to Christians (Col 1:2). “Brethren” is also mentioned again in Heb 3:12, (forming a possible inclusion). In Hebrews, “brethren” occurs seven out of eight times where the context argues for spiritual kinship.²³ The exception where the sense is that of ethnic kinship occurs in 7:5. The author thus believes that they are Christians.

Second, the warning not to “depart” (ἀφίστημι) can be understood as addressing believers. As bad as the word “apostatize” sounds, all it means is “go away, withdraw.”²⁴ Logically then they have to actually *be* a part of the group, in order to be asked not to depart *from* the group. The context points to the possibility of being lured from their present worship system into another. From verses 2-5, the Greek word οἶκος appears six times. This is the same word translated in the LXX (Num 12:7) as “tabernacle.” Hebrews 3:3 states, “Moses indeed was faithful in all of his house.” This seems to refer to Exod 40:16 and the arrangement of the

²¹ Though the Greek literally reads “he who disobeys the Son,” the translation “he who disbelieves the Son” is proper since unbelief is clearly in view. See BAGD, 82.

²² F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 100.

²³ Hebrews 2:11, 12, 17; 3:1, 12; 10:19; 13:22.

²⁴ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v., “aphiste,mi,” 155.

tabernacle (cf. 40:1-15) in order to establish the worship system. However, no matter how important Moses was in establishing this system, Christ is greater, because He is what the whole worship system is about (see chapters 7–9) by being “over His own house” (Heb 3:6). Thus, the warning to the Hebrew Christians (3:6b-12) refers not only to abandoning their faith, but also to abandoning the newly established worship system which they held at one point (3:12-14). This is suggested by the phrases “partakers of the heavenly calling” and “partakers of Christ” (3:14).

The Exodus generation did not enter into the land because of their “unbelief” and because they did not “hold fast...to the end” (3:6, 12, 14). The word “unbelief” can refer to unbelievers (1 Cor 6:6), but it can also refer to immature believers. The Lord’s eleven disciples were rebuked for their “unbelief” in His resurrection (Mark 16:14; John 20:27). Hebrews 5:12-14 shows that the Hebrew Christians lacked maturity.

Finally, if “entering” God’s rest (3:11) or being “partakers of Christ” (3:14) are terms that should be equated with entering the kingdom and/or receiving eternal life, Moses himself could not have been justified. This would be evidenced by the fact that he never entered the Promised Land. The term “rest,” mentioned in Heb 3:11, 18; 4:1, 3, 5, 8, 9, is used synonymously with the term “inheritance.” This inheritance would have been in the form of the land of promise which Israel was to possess.²⁵ However, possession of the land would have come only through obedience to God’s commands,²⁶ which first generation Israelites²⁷ and Moses failed to accomplish.²⁸ This resulted in God’s wrath (3:11; 4:3).

These are real warnings to real Christians not to disobey and incur God’s wrath. That is what makes this and all other warnings within Hebrews so powerful. Hence, the NT warns, commands, and exhorts all Christians to live holy lives²⁹ (cf. Romans 5–8; 12–14; 1 and 2 Corinthians; Ephesians 4–6; James; 1 Peter; 2 Peter; 1 John; Revelation

²⁵ Deuteronomy 3:18-20; 12:9-10.

²⁶ Deuteronomy 3:18; 6:1; 28:58-68; 29:14-28.

²⁷ Numbers 26:2, 65.

²⁸ Deuteronomy 32:48-52.

²⁹ BDAG, 721, points to extra-biblical documents of the Koine period which mention God’s wrath coming on disobedient Christians: “Of the Lord’s wrath against renegade Christians, Hv [Hermas, *Visions*] 3. 6. 1. The Lord turns away (divine) indignation from someone . . . Hv 4. 2. 6.—Of the wrath of God’s angel of repentance, Hm [Hermas *Mandates*] 12. 4. 1.”

2–3). Paul clearly warned the Christians in Eph 5:1-7 to live obediently and not to “partake” of the sins of the “children of disobedience,” because this would logically bring upon them the wrath of God.³⁰ When one commits a sin there will always be a result and a consequence. That is the force of the command and warning.

As in the OT, the “wrath of God” in the NT falls upon the unregenerate and on disobedient believers. Thus, God awaits one’s choice—for the unregenerate to believe and for the believer to obey. Thus, to extinguish the wrath of God requires obedience for the regenerate; and for the unregenerate, faith.

C. GOD’S WRATH DISTINGUISHED

In order to avoid confusion, it is critical to distinguish the NT categories and nuances of meaning of God’s wrath: present, present-eschatological, and strict-eschatological.³¹

First, the present wrath of God should be understood as referring to God’s past and present displeasure and His judgment against sin. In 1 Thess 2:16 the verb “has come” (ἐφθασεν, aorist indicative) may be understood as describing an event “that is not yet past as though it was already completed.”³² In this passage, God’s wrath has presently come upon the Jews.³³

Second, the present-eschatological wrath of God can be defined as “already-but-not-yet.” That is, God’s wrath can presently be in effect without necessarily excluding impending future wrath to come.³⁴ In Eph 5:6, the present tense verb “is coming” (ἔρχομαι) may be viewed as

³⁰ R. V. G. Tasker, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1951), 38.

³¹ The “present” nuance of God’s wrath is His dealing with sin now. The “present-eschatological” nuance of God’s wrath comes with a “already-but-not-yet” element. That is, God’s wrath can begin to be manifest at the present but awaits a future culmination. Finally, the “strict-eschatological” nuance of God’s wrath comes at some future point in time.

³² Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 563, allows for this occurrence to be viewed as a proleptic aorist, however, he believes that this interpretation is “debatable.” See Matt 12:28 where this same verb is used with a present force (cf. Rom 9:31; 2 Cor 10:14).

³³ Other passages with a strict-present nuance of God’s wrath are Rom 1:18; 3:5; 4:15; 5:9; 9:22; 12:19; 13:4-5.

³⁴ Stählin, “ὄργη,” in TDNT, 5:430.

having a futuristic force, as “an event *begun* in the present time, but completed in the future.”³⁵

One could argue for the purely eschatological use here. However, contextually, if Paul’s present exhortation is to have its full affect in Eph 5:6, present realities with future connotations carry more weight. The bigger context in Ephesians 1–3 emphasizes the present position in Christ, and Ephesians 4–6 emphasizes the present—not future—practice in the Spirit.³⁶ Thus, the use of wrath in Eph 5:6, when viewed in light of the context of the letter, can reasonably be interpreted in light of the present-eschatological view.³⁷

Finally, the third category of wrath in the NT occurs with a strict-eschatological nuance, which has only the future in mind. It does not take into account the present reality, only present change based on future realities. Passages that are used to demonstrate this view are 1 Thess 1:10; 5:9. First Thessalonians 1:10 speaks of “the wrath to come.” These words appear together in six verses (Matt 3:7; Eph 5:6; Col 3:6; 1 Thess 1:10; Rev 6:17; 11:18). “The wrath” points to the future reality of the “coming of the Lord,” (1 Thess 3:13) or “coming of our Lord” (4:15; 5:23).

The term “the wrath” usually appears in the Book of Revelation with the article “the” in front of both ὀργή and θυμός. The only time the article is omitted in Revelation is when it is used of

³⁵ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 537, states that futuristic presents are found especially with “verbs of coming, going, etc...”

³⁶ William Hendriksen, *Galatians and Ephesians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 230, says, “The wrath spoken of here, though in a sense already present, is also ever on the way, until on the day of the great consummation of all things it will fully be revealed.” See Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42 (Dallas, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1990), 325-26, who, although disagreeing with this position here, says that, “Most commentators allow for both present and future aspects of wrath in 5:5” (Editor’s note: It actually occurs in 5:6). He goes on to mention that those who hold an already-but-not-yet wrath position include Abbot, Schlier, Barth, Ernst, Schnackenburg, and Mussner.

³⁷ Other passages with a present-eschatological nuance of God’s wrath are Matt 3:7; Luke 3:7; 23:21; John 3:36; Eph 2:3; Col 3:6. A national judgment is referred to in Luke 3:7; 21:23, see J. H. Thayer, ed., *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 452.

the devil's wrath (Rev 12:12). This is not surprising considering that in every case except one,³⁸ when ὀργή and θυμός appear in NT, with men as their executors, it is always without the article.³⁹

Perhaps, since the article “the” usually appears with the term “wrath” in Revelation, which culminates God's wrath in history, it should be identified as the article “par excellence” by which all other occurrences are classified.⁴⁰ Thus, although “the wrath” to come may influence present behavior, its culmination is strictly future.⁴¹

D. SUMMARY

Several factors emerge from these observations. First, God's wrath in the NT comes because of sinful practices and not because of a person's position. However, a person's internal state must change (e.g., Rom 3:21–4:25) before external results appear (5–8; 12–15). Second, God's wrath in the NT applies equally to unbelievers as well as sinning believers. Third, when speaking of God's wrath, three different categories appear in the NT: the present aspect, present-eschatological aspect, and the strict-eschatological aspect.

Thus, even in passages that speak of God's future wrath, this writer could not find one single instance where wrath referred unambiguously to eternal punishment. Wherever God's future wrath appears, it can reasonably be argued, given the context, as referring to the time of the tribulation judgment. Whether God's wrath should ever be understood as

³⁸ Perhaps, the article appears with “wrath” (for the Egyptian Pharaoh's wrath) in Heb 11:27 in order to heighten the effect of what living by faith accomplishes. That is, the meaning here could be that even under the most severe wrath, like no other (hence, the wrath—not just any wrath—is mentioned), people that live by faith can overcome it.

³⁹ Such passages are the following: Luke 4:28; Acts 19:28; 2 Cor 12:20; Eph 4:31; Col 3:8; 1 Tim 2:8; Jas 1:19-20. However, when speaking of the Lamb's wrath in Rev 6:16-17, it comes with the article, “the wrath of the Lamb.”

⁴⁰ One must take notice that even when the term “of God” (του θεου) does not appear with “wrath” (ὀργή), in Judaism ὀργή stood autonomously as an entity that was understood as God's wrath (Stählin, “ὀργή,” in TDNT, 5:423).

⁴¹ Other passages that might well be viewed under the eschatological-future categories are Rev 11:18; 14:8, 10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19; 18:3; 19:15.

eternal judgment is highly questionable.⁴² Instead, God's wrath should be defined as His temporal displeasure and display of judgment against all human sin, whether performed by unbelievers or sinning believers. This is also true in the Book of Romans.

IV. GOD'S WRATH IN ROMANS

The concept of God's wrath is more conspicuous in Paul's writings than anyone else in the NT.⁴³ Twenty-one out of the NT's thirty-six uses of ὀργή appear in Paul's thirteen letters. Twelve of these are in Romans (1:18; 2:5 [twice], 8; 3:5; 4:15; 5:9; 9:22 [twice]; 12:19; 13:4, 5).

It has been said that fifty percent of all solutions lie in acknowledging the problem. The problem one encounters in the commentary tradition of Romans is the common assumption that God's wrath usually means eternal punishment⁴⁴ and by default cannot apply to Christians. It is this author's contention that all twelve occurrences of God's wrath in the Book of Romans need reassessment.

⁴² Others have made this same observation in the NT. See Stählin, "ὀργή," TDNT, 5:423, 433-34. Stählin believes in an OT eternal ὀργή, but says the wrath of God in the NT never "last[s] to eternity." In addition, Zane C. Hodges, "The Message of Romans," *The Kerugma Message* 6 (February 1997), 1, believes "there is not a single NT example of this word [Greek, ὀργή] where it refers unambiguously to the experience of eternal punishment. Every NT instance of God's ὀργή can be understood as a reference to the temporal display of God's displeasure with human sin."

⁴³ MacGregor, "Concept of the Wrath of God in the New Testament," 102. Fifty-eight percent of all occurrences of this word appear in Pauline literature.

⁴⁴ The prevailing thought in scholarship interprets wrath, with few exceptions, throughout Romans as eternal punishment. See C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Revised ed. Black's New Testament Commentary, ed., Henry Chadwick, vol. 6 (London: A & C Black Limited, 1957; reprint, [Peabody]: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 44, 100, 176-77; Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 135, 190, 310, 607; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959-65), 171.

A. ROMANS 1:18

This verse clearly teaches that God's wrath (ὀργὴ θεοῦ) is presently "being revealed" (ἀποκαλύπτεται). Almost universally, all admit the present reality of God's wrath in 1:18.

First, the particle "for" (γὰρ) beginning in verse 18 carries a causal sense and refers back to the clause "God's righteousness is revealed" (present tense) in 1:17. Therefore, since God's righteousness is presently being revealed (same tense and verb as in 1:18) this gives support for understanding the phrase "God's wrath is revealed" as something that occurs presently.⁴⁵

Second, an even better reason to understand God's wrath as a present reality comes from the statements: "God also gave them up" (Rom 1:24); "God gave them up" (Rom 1:26); and "God gave them over" (Rom 1:28). God's present wrath is evidenced as He lifts His hand of protection and allows sin to run its course. As in the OT, wrath continues to be poured out upon the unbeliever, forcing him to sink deeper and deeper into the mire of sin. This wrath will continue and fall in any "day of wrath" as mentioned in Rom 2:5, 8.

B. ROMANS 2:5, 8

The transition from the first group (1:18-32), who are "without excuse" (1:20, NASB), to the second group (2:1-16), who are also "without excuse" (2:1), is important to note. Just as the first group experiences God's wrath (1:18), contextually the wrath in 2:5, 8 should also be seen as a present reality. In 2:1, the word "therefore" (διὸ) acts as a connector—linking both groups.⁴⁶ One, however, should not understand "therefore" to relate primarily to the sins of the Gentiles, which are described in 1:21-32, but to God's wrath in 1:18.⁴⁷ It follows

⁴⁵ Barrett, 33.

⁴⁶ Moo, *Romans*, 129, says that if Paul meant to distinguish both of these groups, he would have transitioned "with something like 'in the same manner also.'" See C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, The International Critical Commentary, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 141, who also admits "therefore" in 2:1 refers to the whole section 1:18-32.

⁴⁷ Moo, *Romans*, 129.

then that “God’s wrath” in 1:18 is the same “wrath” which these people are storing up for themselves in 2:5.⁴⁸

Furthermore, the term “wrath” in 2:5 grammatically refers back to “treasuring up,” which also points to the present temporal “wrath” mentioned in 1:18.⁴⁹ This wrath refers to a current day when God’s judgment falls. Since the terms *wrath* and *revelation* appear here as in 1:18, an *inclusio* is in order. This bookend dictates that Paul’s use of wrath here refers *not* to a *future day* but to *any day of wrath* indicated by the context. A period would then follow v 5 (as in the NIV, NET and Jerusalem Bible). Then the relative pronoun, of v 6, functions as a personal pronoun (He) or noun (God) introducing a new idea. Second, the phrase *the day* in the Greek does not have a definite article implying that *any* undefined *day* may be the time period when wrath falls.⁵⁰ Third, the Greek preposition (ἐν) should be translated “in” (NKJV) instead of “for” (NIV) that is a bit forced. This implies that the moralist is *in this day already*. This view fits best with the context and details of the text.⁵¹

Romans 2:8 further strengthens the idea that Paul is referring to *a day of wrath* and not to the Great White Throne Judgment or to the tribulation period by his use of “indignation and wrath.”⁵² The phrase

⁴⁸ Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 301, understands “treasuring up wrath” to refer to ongoing present reality culminating at the day of the Lord: “Yet is the same wrath that is revealed from heaven against the heathen (1:18).”

⁴⁹ Karl Barth, *A Shorter Commentary on Romans* (Richmond: John Knox, 1959), 34, interprets “wrath” in 2:5 as “treasuring up” which refers to the present experience of wrath in 1:18. Cranfield, *Romans*, 145-46, disagrees with Barth, but still gives a favorable consideration to his view by being consistent with the Greek and is in line with “Paul’s thought in general,” and has “strong support.”

⁵⁰ Though the absence of an article does not necessarily make the noun *indefinite* (Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 243), the absence of it along with the context seems to indicate Paul does not have a definite period in mind.

⁵¹ Zane C. Hodges, “The Moralist Wrath-Dodger,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 18 (Spring 2005): 15-21 espouses this view.

⁵² David R. Anderson, “The National Repentance of Israel,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 1998): 23, understands that: “Rom 2:5 may look like eternal judgment at first blush.” Instead, it belongs to the “wrath to come in the Tribulation period.” Since the phrase “indignation and wrath”

indignation and wrath (ὀργή and θυμός) is used three times by John in Revelation 14:10; 16:19; 19:15 to refer to God's judgment in the tribulation. Although the combination of ὀργή and θυμός refers to the day of the LORD in the tribulation (Isa 13:9; 30:30; Jer 7:20; 21:5), the LXX uses it in a general sense for God's anger as well (Deut 29:22; Ps 68:25; Isa 10:5). Contextually the latter fits best. Therefore, for the unbeliever to continue on that course will only cause him to experience and accumulate wrath that will fall at any moment, which is already *a day of wrath* (cf. 2:5).

C. ROMANS 3:5

In typical fashion, Paul uses an imaginary objector in Rom 3:5. The objector supposes that if sin demonstrates God's righteousness and glory, "to inflict wrath" upon them would be unjust. Man's unrighteousness merely shows God's righteous character and basis to be their Judge. Wrath here takes on the form of present punishment for the following reasons (cf. 1:18; 2:5). Here "the wrath" (τὴν ὀργήν) refers back to God's wrath of 1:18.⁵³ The Greek article in front of wrath is an article of previous reference.⁵⁴ It points back to the present wrath that began the argument of the book. This wrath is part of the present problem within the bigger context of 1:18–3:20, which culminates in the present solution found in 3:21–4:25. Thus, contextually, this wrath must have a present nuance.

Furthermore, since "the wrath" refers back to God's present wrath in 1:18, the term "inflict" (ὁ ἐπιφέρων, present tense) has a present force that could be translated "bringing His wrath" (NIV).⁵⁵ The meaning then

(=ὀργή and θυμός, 2:8) appears three times in Rev 14:10; 16:19; 19:15 referring to God's judgment in the tribulation, one can see Anderson's logic.

The two other places where Paul uses ὀργή and θυμός together refer to human beings (Eph 4:31; Col 3:8) not God.

⁵³ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1988), 135, says, "The ὀργη is primarily eschatological (v 6), but includes the 'wrath' already being displayed—ἐπιφέρων, present tense."

⁵⁴ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 217-20.

⁵⁵ J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistle of St. Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 266, interprets the verb in 3:6 "to judge" (=κρινεῖ, present tense) as the NIV translators do "how could God judge the

in vv 5-6 is this: God's righteous character (v 4) gives Him the right, now, to inflict wrath on sinners and thereby receive glory by showing His justice which proves His holy character. Thus, God is just. Otherwise, as Jews know,⁵⁶ how will He judge the world (vv 5-6)? God is the Judge and is serious about sin. Those who do not come to Him on His terms—through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone—abide in His present wrath. This is something we need to be reminded of, since it seems to have evaded our “no fear” generation.

D. ROMANS 4:15

In 4:15, the phrase “because the law brings wrath” should be taken negatively, even though Paul states that the law in itself is “holy,” “just,” and “good” in 7:12. However, if one tries to use the law to earn God's righteousness, which Paul's Jewish contemporaries believed that they could do (2:1–3:20),⁵⁷ then the law will result in wrath. Contextually, the idea from vv 13-16 shows that the promise Abraham believed—coming by grace through a faith-type-righteousness—could not have been achieved through the law. Paul refers to the negative affects that the law brings in contrast to the promise of a faith-based-righteousness. Of course, Christians “are not under law but under grace,” which comes by

world.” Lightfoot says, “It is perhaps best here (as in 2:16) to read the present rather than the future [will judge=] (κρίνει)...The judgment alluded to is going on day by day.” Certainly, in one sense a present “judgment” is occurring demonstrated by the linking of the present wrath to God's wrath of 1:18. However, present wrath need not imply a present judgment. Instead, Paul means to say that God's present infliction of wrath causes the objector to unfairly accuse Him. If so, then how can he hold simultaneous ideas of a future just Judge who is presently unjust because He inflicts wrath? It is impossible. Contra Morris, God's character is the point in question, which is inferred by the fact that wrath is being presently inflicted.

⁵⁶ God's future judgment of the world was a common Jewish belief (Isa 66:16; Joel 3:12; Pss 94:2; 96:13. See Fitzmeyer, *Romans*, 328.

⁵⁷ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 235, acknowledges that Paul's “Jewish contemporaries would prefer to say ‘the law brings righteousness.’” However, “Paul has argued resolutely that righteousness comes through faith.” Contra Dunn, Moo, *Romans*, 277, believes Paul's point here is to explain how wrath, while existing before the Mosaic Law, intensified when the Mosaic Law appeared because people were now accountable to a written code. Thus, the promise cannot come to Abraham's seed (Jews) through the Mosaic Law since the law intensified wrath not righteousness.

faith and promise (Rom 4:13, 16; 6:14). But to those who are not under grace, the law is continually at work and wrath continues to be upon them (1:18–3:20).

Furthermore, the principle of law-keeping for believers will also result in a death experience and wrath.⁵⁸ Hence, *κατεργάζεται* (to work or bring) appears in Romans six times within 7:8-20 (8, 13, 15, 17, 18, 20) and five times elsewhere (1:27; 2:9; 4:15; 5:3; 15:18). Strikingly, it appears in the section where Paul makes the contrast between “the commandment” (cf. 7:8, 9, 10, 11, i.e., “the law” as well, cf. 7:16, 22, 25) and “the law of sin which is in his members” (cf. 7:21, 23). This suggests that even though Paul was under grace, if he attempted to carry out the law, it would result in a death experience (cf. 7:7-25). The word *κατεργάζεται* appears in the present tense, and is used throughout the book with a present reality (except twice, 7:8; 15:8, aorist tense) referring to the wrath that began in 1:18.⁵⁹ This wrath must be a present reality because when one observes the law, he does so in the present. Thus, the outcome must by necessity be present as the context indicates.

E. ROMANS 5:9

Commentators almost universally interpret the phrase “the wrath” found in 5:9 as eternal judgment.⁶⁰ Therefore, this view understands salvation—which is directly linked to wrath here—in the sense of justification before God. However, this interpretation of wrath raises several concerns.

First, the phrase “saved from wrath *through Him*” in 5:9 and “*by His life*” in 5:10 are parallel phrases which demonstrate the concept of “life” (italics added). Contextually the word “life” appears overwhelmingly more in sections that deal with the present experience of life (Romans

⁵⁸ Brice L. Martin, “Paul on Christ in the Law,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (September 1983): 274, understands that to live by the Law “is fatal” (cf. Rom 6:14-15; 7:6; Gal 5:18).

⁵⁹ Dunn, *Romans*, 214. Dunn says Paul’s answer to the law problem and humanity “is to link Torah with God’s wrath rather than with the promise—the tense implying that Paul had in mind the outworking of God’s ὀργή in 1:18-32 rather than His final judgment as in 2:5, 8.”

⁶⁰ Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 138; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 268; Cranfield, *Romans*, 266; Murray, *Romans*, 1:171; Moo, *Romans*, 310.

5–8; 12–15) than in sections that deal with eternal life (Romans 1–4).⁶¹ Paul intentionally uses “life” or “live” in an experiential manner (Rom 6:2, 11, 13; 7:1, 2, 3; 8:12-13).

Second, Paul also uses the “death-life” motif together in eight verses (chapters 5 and 8) where the contrast is between experiential life and experiential death. The word death (θάνατος) appears only once in the first four chapters (1:32), twenty-four times in chapters 5–8, and never in chapters 9–16.

Third, Paul does not use σώζω (save) or σωτηρία (salvation) in the justification section of Romans (3:21–4:25). Unfortunately, this has gone relatively unnoticed.⁶² Instead, Paul uses the word δικαίω (justified) to connote judicial acquittal in Romans.⁶³ To say that “saved from wrath” means deliverance from future eternal judgment would be redundant since this was expounded to the fullest extent in 3:21–4:25.

Deliverance from “the wrath” (τῆς ὀργῆς) in 5:9 refers to the temporal wrath of God (ὀργὴ θεοῦ) that began the argument of the book in 1:18; this wrath is against the dominion and condition of sin.⁶⁴ This view understands wrath as something Christians can still experience post-justification (cf. 13:4-5). Therefore, deliverance from the power and experience of sin comes “through Him...by His life” (i.e., living the resurrection-life of Christ found in the following section concerning sanctification, Romans 6–8).

F. ROMANS 9:22

In 9:22, the word “wrath” appears twice, “What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.” This verse has

⁶¹ For a detailed analysis see René A. Lopez, “An Exposition of SOTERIA and SOZO by Paul in the Epistle to the Romans” (Th.M. Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2002), 45-46. The noun “life” and verb “live” appear three-times from 1–4 and twenty-five times from 5–8.

⁶² John F. Hart, “Why Confess Christ? The Use and Abuse of Romans 10:9-10,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 1999): 17, notes: “An observation that is rarely detected is that Paul has deliberately avoided using ‘salvation’ (σωτηρία) and ‘save’ (σώζω) in his entire discussion about justification by faith in 3:21–4:25!”

⁶³ Lopez, “SOTERIA and SOZO in Romans,” 43.

⁶⁴ Zane C. Hodges, *Problem Passages in the Greek New Testament* cassette CP 1560 (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1974).

produced much speculation. Again, “*His* wrath” (τὴν ὀργήν) refers to God’s wrath in 1:18, since the article is one of previous reference.

Moo sees the “destruction” of these “vessels of wrath” as eternal.⁶⁵ The bigger context here could support Moo’s idea. In 9:1-13, Paul presents Israel’s rejection of the promise. Then in 9:14-33, Paul gives the reason for Israel’s present state. In 9:14-17, Paul shows God’s sovereign right to do as He pleases. No one has a claim on Him and His mercy (vv 15-16). Thus, it follows that in 9:17-33, Paul shows God’s sovereign right to exercise both His wrath and His mercy.

In v. 22, Paul uses the verb “to show” (ἐνδείκνυμι) when referring to His wrath. He uses the same verb earlier in v 17 to demonstrate the purpose of His wrath, namely to show His power. God presently endured Pharaoh (a vessel of wrath) so that He could demonstrate His power through the ten plagues of Egypt. It follows then, that God presently endures the “vessels of wrath” for the purpose of manifesting His glory through the “vessels of mercy” (9:23). Logic dictates that the term “vessels of wrath” in 9:22 refers to present wrath, because the parallel term in 9:23 “vessels of mercy” must be a present occurrence, since God wants “to make known [‘to show’, vv 17, 22] the riches of His glory to the vessels of mercy” in the present.

Some may interpret “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” as wrath that leads to eternal destruction since it parallels the phrase “prepared beforehand for glory” in 9:23. In Romans, most of Paul’s uses of “glory” underscore man’s final destiny (2:7, 10; 5:2; 8:18, 21, 28-30).⁶⁶ Hence, if the term “glory” refers to man’s blissful eternal destiny, it follows then that the parallel term “destruction” refers to man’s horrific eternal destiny.

However, even if the meaning of the expression “for destruction” (9:22), parallel to the expression “for glory,” encompasses a temporal as well as eternal scope (which seems to be the case here),⁶⁷ it does not logically prove that wrath is eternal, since “destruction” is the result of wrath. Thus, this destruction is not equal to wrath, but is the final outcome of it. That is, wrath is what draws God’s judgment, while

⁶⁵ Moo, *Romans*, 607.

⁶⁶ For a detailed analysis see Lopez, “SOTERIA and SOZO in Romans,” 76-77.

⁶⁷ One can argue that both “glory” (4:20; 5:2; 15:17) and “destruction” (3:16; 14:15, 20) encompass a present-temporal element in Romans.

destruction is the outcome of the final judgment. To interpret the cause (wrath) as equal to the final effect (destruction) results in merging two related but distinct concepts.

G. ROMANS 12:19

From 12:17–13:8, the context is mainly concerned with Christians not taking matters into their own hands. Verse 17 makes this point by stating, “Repay no one evil for evil.” The idea is one of retaliation. The reason we should not repay evil for evil is because it is God’s job. God repays.

Paul begins v. 19 with “Beloved.” He gently—but firmly—exhorts them “not to avenge” themselves, but rather to “give place” (δότε τόπον), or turn over, their revenge to God’s wrath. The two other places in the NT where the expression “give place” appears it has someone else as its executor (Luke 14:9; Eph 4:27). The idea here would then mean to “make room for the wrath of God.”⁶⁸ Hence, Paul quotes from Deut 32:35 to make his point, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.” The context of Deut 32:35 refers to the repayment of Israel’s enemies by God at a point in time. Thus, it is temporal wrath. Furthermore, the expression “the wrath” has the article of previous reference pointing to God’s temporal wrath in 1:18.⁶⁹

The government may well be the executor of this wrath (13:4-5). The subject matter certainly extends to 13:8. This temporal wrath can presently come directly from God or indirectly through the civil government (cf. 13:4-5).⁷⁰

H. ROMANS 13:4-5

Both occurrences of “wrath” in 13:4-5 refer to the temporal punishment inflicted by “God’s ministers,” (i.e., the government through whom God works indirectly). The present context flows from 12:17, “Repay no one evil for evil.” The Christian must depend on God’s wrath to repay evil (v. 19). On the contrary, believers must repay evil with good (v. 21). Therefore, as Dunn correctly acknowledges, vv. 1-4 “serve as the thesis which [Paul] elaborates and repeats for emphasis in verse

⁶⁸ Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:646.

⁶⁹ Morris, *Romans*, 454, interprets this also as temporal wrath.

⁷⁰ Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 749.

5.”⁷¹ Thus, the wrath in 13:5 is not only temporal, but has Christians in mind. The Christian is the “you,” which is connected with the following phrase: “Therefore, *you* must be subject not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake” (cf. Jas 5:20; 1 John 5:15-16, both of which refer to Christians experiencing wrath).

V. CONCLUSION

As we have seen, God’s grace and wrath are equally important. In the OT, God’s temporal wrath fell upon unbelievers and believers. Under the New Covenant, unbelievers and disobedient believers continue to experience God’s temporal wrath.

May we that labor for the grace message not develop a false sense of security concerning the experience of God’s wrath, as Tasker aptly asserts,

The New Testament is very far, however, from asserting that the Christian is automatically, as it were, removed from any manifestation of divine anger. The burden of its message is that the justified sinner must become the sanctified sinner. He is called to abide in the divine love. The essential difference between the believer and the unbeliever is that, while the latter, whether he realizes it or not, is inevitably subject to God’s wrath, the believer, by continual submission to the Holy Spirit, remains under grace, and so escapes that wrath. Paul was much concerned to warn the Christian of the danger of being deluded by a false sense of security.⁷²

God’s wrath does not discriminate when it comes to sin. Wrath is as much of a reality for believers as it is for unbelievers.

⁷¹ Ibid., 759. F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 224, acknowledges the contextual connection from 12:17–13:5.

⁷² Tasker, *The Wrath of God*, 38.