

# OpenTheo

## What Is the Biblical Definition of God's Wrath?

November 2, 2023



### #STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about the biblical definition of God's wrath and how Christians can process the heartbreaking idea of decent Jewish people going to Hell because they don't have Christ.

\* Many people think of wrath as blinding, uncontrolled rage leading to violence or as one of the seven deadly sins, so what is the biblical definition of God's wrath?

\* How should we as Christians process the heartbreaking idea of decent Jewish people going to Hell because they don't have Christ?

### Transcript

Welcome to the hashtag S-T-R-S-C-P-U-K-S. I'm Amy Hall and with me is Greg Koukl. Trying to make Amy laugh.

It's succeeding, apparently. Okay, let's- It's a good way to start a show, though. It is.

And actually, this is- I have some pretty serious questions this time, so- Yeah. Not like the frivolous ones we deal with you. We have had a few serious ones in a row, but- But this one comes from Andre.

What is the biblical definition of wrath, specifically in relation to God? Some probably think of blinding uncontrolled rage leading to violence, or they think about wrath being one of the seven deadly sins. Well, it's not one of the seven deadly sins for God. I don't know.

Is it- in general, is it one of the seven deadly sins? Maybe, anger? I'm not sure. I'm not sure. Gluttony, or whatever.

Just to make it clear, the stand to heaven, I don't know. Standards for God are different from the standards of men, just like the standards for adults or parents are different than the standards for children. Okay? Some things are wrong in light of their exercise by those who have no right to exercise those things.

Okay? So, it isn't as if there are just these- there's these- just these moral, in a certain sense, absolutes. That means these are untrumpable and irrespective of circumstances. That's the way people will sometimes characterize that.

They don't use that language, but that's what it amounts to. Even for humans, absolutes are not that way because we have things that are otherwise wrong in a certain set of circumstances when pitted against another wrong in a circumstance that we call an ethical dilemma. Then one must choose the greater good.

And so- and that can only happen if there are- some things are greater goods than others or lesser evils, however you want to characterize it. And so- so that's even true with human beings, that it kind of depends on the circumstances, and that's true with God. So if- if it's wrong for human beings to exercise a certain kind of wrath, doesn't mean that God, it's wrong for God to do that.

It- actually the text says, don't take your own revenge, but leave room for the wrath of God. Okay? So that- when- when humans do what they're not supposed to do, it's a vengeful act that's not appropriate. When God instead does it, then it's an act of justice that is appropriate.

Okay? Just like if somebody, you know, kills your friend and then you go and kill them. Okay? That's- that's a breach of justice because you don't have the authority to execute justice the government does. But it's not wrong when the government executes via capital punishment.

Generally speaking, I'm not- can take that issue on, but most people know there's a difference. And even by the way, when they- people are against capital punishment, oftentimes the way they characterize it is that it's not right for man to play God. Notice how implicit in that response is the idea that some things that are right for God are wrong for human beings.

Okay? So, so wrath isn't a sin for God. It is an appropriate act of judgment towards rebellion against the sovereign, sin, if you will. The other part of the question though is what exactly is that? And I like the way I'm trying to think of Alistair Begg put it this way once because God doesn't go through emotional stages.

Okay? This is classically characterized as God without passion or the- he is, that's another word for it, that impassability. That God doesn't go through these stages where he's happy and then he gets really mad and he's happy and then he's mad. And we see things that look like that in scripture particularly in the Old Testament, but these are anthropomorphisms.

These are ways of describing God's responses or actions analogically in a way that humans could understand them. But actually the way Alistair Begg puts it is he has a

fixed disposition regarding certain things. He has a fixed disposition of love, say for Israel.

He is made commitment to Israel, but he also has a fixed disposition regarding rebellion. And so in the case of Israel, though he loves Israel, there is also this other element that comes into play because of their own rebellion. And then justice becomes the predominant motif for God in that season of Israel's existence.

And then some later time the fixed disposition of love will come in and restore. We say, I'm reading through Jeremiah now and you see this over and over again. God's judgment against them and anger and all the reasons why.

And then his mercy and grace that he's expressing when, about how he will redeem them, rescue them eventually after this season of discipline. So what wrath is I guess is simply is a justified anger that is accompanied with punishment. I mean, I'm just, I didn't get that out of a dictionary anywhere.

I didn't do an exegetical study of the word, but I'm just thinking inductively when you look at these, the expression of God's wrath. It is an anger. I mean, that's why the word wrath is used.

Wrath is a kind of anger towards sinful people. This idea that God loves the sinner, but hates the sin is not accurate. It has a measure of truth to it, but it misleads because it is the sinner that God hates.

Check out Psalm 5 and Psalm 11. Check out Proverbs where it talks about the, what's seven things that are an abomination to God. These are body parts, feet that run quickly to evil hands that shed innocent blood, mouths that spread lies among brethren, et cetera, et cetera.

So the God is not just mad at sin in the abstract. He is furious at sinners. And it is the fury that God has towards sinners that makes the grace of God express through Jesus so significant.

Because the grace and forgiveness and mercy that God gives is proportional to the anger and wrath that we deserve. The greater the wrath we deserve, the greater the act of mercy is in forgiveness. Okay.

If we're just guilty of little bitty peca-dilloos, minor infractions, then God's grace is rather modest. And by the way, this is very easy to understand in our own lives. Somebody does a little thing against us.

We say, Oh, never mind. It's okay. I forgive you.

Forget about it. No problem. You know, whatever.

But if somebody does a big bad thing against us, then when we forgive, in that case, everybody knows it's a much more noble, weighty, self sacrificial thing to do. So we ought not be, in a certain sense, we ought not diminish the reality of the angry wrath of God that is expressed in punishment of evil tours. Because it is that wrath of God that gives substance to the grace of the mercy of God as well.

Right. We can't understand him choosing to love his enemies and in choosing to save them and show them grace can only be understood in light of the goodness of justice and the goodness of, or in the, in the depth of what we deserve. One thing Andre said here was people thinking of it as blinding uncontrolled rage.

Well, God is never controlled by some sort of emotion. God's never out of control. So I think that's where we start to get confused and comparing him to human beings, fallen human beings at that, and wrongly comparing them.

There's no, but there is a sense though that the phrase captures an intensity of anger that I think is probably more accurate in the intensity. Intensity, right, but not being out control. That's what we realize exactly.

God's not overcome by something because that's what happens with us. Maybe we get so angry, we do think we're out of control. We do things that aren't actually just in return.

That never happens to God. He's completely just. And we, we know that it is good for judges to express wrath against sinners.

I mean, even human judges, the way they express wrath against sinners is with their, the sentencing. They will sentence criminals to particular punishments. So that is them expressing wrath against sin towards criminals.

And when they don't do that, we think they're terrible judges and we get very angry. They got away with motor kind of thing. Yes, we don't like that.

I think when we, when we really stop and think about it, we know that we don't want some judge to sweep evil under the rug. We hate it when that happens. So why would we want God to do that? We don't.

We only, we just don't want him to do it to us. We want him to bring a justice for everyone else. That's right.

I talk about, I talk about that in the story of reality. We always want the bad other person to get their comeuppance, but not us. We, we want to be the exception, right? And, and we know that, you know, just look at the Old Testament with Pharaoh and the Exodus.

God was showing his, his wrath towards sin and towards these other gods by, you know,

through all of the plagues. That's, this is, it is good for him to reveal that. That is being a good judge is something good.

All you have to do is look through the Psalms and you'll see how many times God is praised for judgment. So I think as long as we don't compare God to a fallen human being who's overcome by, by feelings rather than justice, then I think it's a lot easier to understand. Okay, Greg, let's go on to a question from James.

Jews were God's chosen people, but I struggle and I'm heartbroken with the notion of most decent Jews heading to hell, especially after the recent attack. A nice Jewish grandma or a young innocent soldier dying to a Christless eternity is heartbreaking. As Christians, how do we process that? Well, I, I'm very sympathetic to this.

I feel the same way I have a particular Jewish friend that is among the most noble people that I know and could qualify hands down as a decent Jew. Actually very much beyond that from human standards. And frankly, I don't know why being a Jew matters in this particular concern because this could be said about all kinds of people, even atheists.

Think of Mormons, I kind of sometimes make the joke if we are using niceness to win people to Christ instead of speaking to them. And I'll just show people by my great behavior. I say you'll never be able to out nice a Mormon.

So if that's your witnessing technique, you've got a lot of competition. Mormons are wonderful people by human standards, much better than most Christians. And this is what they take refuge in.

But there is no refuge in that. A whole host of people fall into this category when measured by human standards. And even measured by biblical standards assessed in a human way.

So we can look at all kinds of biblical virtues and say, this person is filled with those virtues. Yes, but when you think about the two greatest commandments, love God with your whole heart, mind, soul, and strength. And by the way, that would have to be the true God, not the false God.

Jesus made this clear in John chapter four. God wants to be worshiped in spirit and in truth. Or loving our neighbor as ourselves as Jesus characterizes the error with the Samaritan, the good Samaritan, the iconic good Samaritan.

That our neighbor is our worst enemy. So if goodness is just reduced to summed up in a certain sense, not so much reduced to just those two things, then nobody even comes close. I have never one time in my whole life ever fulfilled the first great commandment.

Ever. Not even close. So when measured by righteous standards, the standards that God measures by, there is nobody that's good in this sense.

So we can be sympathetic that the innocent are being brutalized and innocent in the human sense. And this is what happened with Hamas in Israel last week and continues to happen. Then and people continue to applaud what happened.

Amazing to me. It's ironic. I read stuff from NBC News and The Washington Times and The Washington Post.

And they were all quite graphic and amazing to me in describing the unbelievable things that happened that weekend. When Israel was assaulted by Hamas in a surprise attack. So they didn't, they didn't kind of candy coat or anything like that.

Even the most leftist pubs here in the legacy press could not understate the horror of the crimes that were committed. All right. Yeah, you still have people that are plotting it.

It's just, anyway, the, the, I, I'm sympathetic in all of those cases to all of those things. And I asked myself the same question. I mean, as a, as a compassionate human being with at least the human view, the measure of compassion, I look and I wonder.

This is, this is why I like certain other systems better than mine. Systems that characterize human beings in a different fashion than what God does and what scripture does. Some, some people will say, I had seen one of the books too.

I mentioned there may be a couple of them. People say, well, I'm no Hitler to which I respond good. One was enough, but you know Jesus of Nazareth either.

And you're probably, and we are probably much more like Hitler than we're like Jesus. Hitler's not the standard. The evil people in the world are not the standard.

We measure ourselves by. We measure ourselves by the law. That is the mirror that we are to look into to see what we're really like.

And Jesus is the one who kept the law perfectly. So he is our measure if you want to think of a human example. So all I can say regarding this is I'm absolutely sympathetic to the emotional anguish that our, our questioner is experiencing.

And I experience it as well. I mean, I remember when the Taliban attacked Afghanistan, took over Afghanistan, here were people that are born in a miserable circumstance, live a miserable life, are killed by miserable people, and then go to hell. I mean, what, what, it's just unbelievable.

But think of the entire planet, though much smaller population than it is now at a billion that lost its life at the flood because of the evil that was everywhere. And the judgment that will come in the end upon the nations because the evil that is everywhere, God's assessment of the evil in men's hearts continually. That really hasn't changed.

That's part of the fallen condition. So we certainly can be compassionate towards those

who are terrible things happen to and who are treated unjustly and even scripture bemoans the treatment of the vulnerable. That is that the powerful wreak upon them, the evil, the, that's why it says so much about widows and orphans and the poor because these are the most vulnerable people in society that that evil folks can easily oppress.

And there's much to say about that, mostly in the Old Testament about that issue. But Jesus was an example where he did include all of those people. He didn't exclude them when he spoke to them.

He didn't campaign for them. He didn't champion them. That's a misunderstanding of Jesus.

It all takes us a close reading of the text to see that, but he certainly included them. He was after sinners in general and that's everybody. I always think about Isaiah.

I think it's, I think it's chapter six, it's either six or nine, but I think it's six. Well, here you have someone who we would say is very good and he was a prophet. He wrote a huge amount of scripture there.

And yet when he sees God and he's confronted with the standard, not, not with people around him because we can look at each other and say, well, I'm better than that guy or I'm, I'm worse than that guy or whatever. But when he was confronted with the actual standard face to face with the vision of God, the holiness of the holiness, he says, whoa is me. I'm a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips and he falls to the ground.

And then an angel touches his lips, I think with a hot coal to purify him. But what we see there is here, here's somebody we would say, well, look at that, that good person. But even Isaiah knew when he saw God face to face that he wasn't enough.

None of us is enough, not one of us. This is why we need Jesus. The only reason why Isaiah wasn't destroyed at that moment was because Jesus was going to come and pay for his sin.

So we are all in the same position here and this is why we share the gospel with people. And, you know, I was reminded of what Paul says because Paul expresses this same issue. He says, I'm telling this is chapter nine of Romans.

I'm telling the truth in Christ. I am not lying. My conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart.

For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen, according to the flesh who are Israelites. It's an amazing thing to say. And by the way, that's Isaiah six.

That is, because that's the call of Isaiah and that's where the great Shema is. We find that in that passage as well. So Paul understood this desire to see them saved.

He says, these were the ones to whom belongs. The giving of the law and the covenants and the temple service and the promises and all of these things. So he shares this desire with you, James.

And I think the answer is we share the gospel because every person on this planet needs it. None of us is good enough. If Isaiah is not good enough, none of us is good enough.

So this, anyway, I know it's hard. And Paul agrees with you. Well, thank you, Andre and James.

We appreciate hearing from you. If you have a question, you can send it on Twitter with the hashtag STRask or go to our website at [str.org](http://str.org) and look for our hashtag STRask page and you'll find a link there where you can send us a question. Just keep it short about two sentences, the length of a tweet.

Not really long sentences, but just short sentences. And we will consider your question. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason.