

---

---

## NUM 16:1-50 : THE WRATH AND THE GRACE OF GOD [1]

No. EE34

---

---

The serious student of the Old Testament finds it hard not to be alarmed at the horrors of God's judgments. We often read about them with feelings of shock and dismay. And what is more, there are so many examples: Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10); Uzzah (2Sam 6); Sodom and Gomorrah (Gn 19); the 450 prophets of Baal at Carmel (1Kings 18); the complete destruction of the towns in Canaan on the instructions of the Lord; the death of 70 000 after David had ordered a census to be taken (2Sam 24). And these are only a few examples.

*Is this the God of the New Testament - the One we call our Father?*

We can ignore the problem, as many people tend to do, or we can think in terms of two gods, as many others do. But we must admit in all honesty that we are confronted here by a serious problem which every Christian needs to face and resolve.

And this calls for courage. It is not a matter for the sentimental or the superficial, because in the process we will need to take an in-depth look at the unfathomable God, the awesome One.

At the very least we will need to take a look at the character of God, because unless we can understand something of who and what God is, any attempt to solve our problem will end in failure.

This is one of the main problems of the contemporary church: *People do not know God.* The modern church is largely built on man-centred sentimentality, sensation, excitement and emotion - unfortunately the very things that often make one

immune to the truths in God's Word. This is why there are tens of thousands who sit in church pews with all sorts of faulty and warped ideas about God.

### God's holiness

Essentially the concept of *holiness* has to do with *separateness*. When applied to God it has to do with His transcendence - the fact that He is above and beyond His creation. He is the Totally Different One!

From this flows the fact of His ethical perfection. He is the sum total of all moral beauty and purity. Who and what He is, is at the same time the definition of what is right and holy.

Sin is therefore totally irreconcilable with God's person and character. And because no person is completely free from sin, nobody can see God and live. Granted, if you live a devout life you may be permitted, like Moses, to see "God's back" (Ex 33:20-23).

There have been people who were permitted to see something of the three times holy God. For all of them this was an almost devastating experience that left an indelible impression on them. Moses covered his face (Ex 3:6); Isaiah was overwhelmed by the realisation of his own impurity (Isa 6:5); Job despised himself (Job 42:6); Ezekiel fell down on his face (Ezek 1:28); Daniel fainted, falling flat on his face (Dn 10:9); John fell at His feet "as though dead" (Rev 1:17).

### God's wrath

God's wrath is the inevitable outflow of His holiness; in fact, inseparable from it. What is it? We could define it as follows: *God's wrath is firstly His eternal and absolute abhorrence of all unrighteousness and sin - everything that is contrary to His person and His character. And secondly it refers to His deeds to give expression to this abhorrence.*

Simply put, *God's wrath is His holiness in action*

*against sin.* Because God is holy, He hates all sin; and because He hates sin, his wrath is evoked against the sinner.

God's wrath is as much part of His character as His love, faithfulness and mercy. There is not the smallest trace of sin in Him. But for Him to show unconcern with or apathy towards sin would be evidence of moral imperfection in Him.

Let us be absolutely clear about this: *just as the eternal salvation of the justified is a product of God's perfection, so also is the everlasting sorrow of sinners.*

There are possibly more references in the Bible to God's wrath and condemnation than to His love and grace. If therefore the Bible is God's self-revelation to us, it is obviously His intent that we should take note of His wrath - and glorify Him for that.

It goes against our human grain, but this is exactly how the Bible depicts God to us. We should not only learn to accept this fact, but we must also meditate on it. Then we will get to understand the seriousness of sin. Then the necessary and holy fear of the Lord will settle in our hearts. And then we will be able all the more to appreciate the wonder of our salvation.

One of the most serious dangers we face is that of conjuring up in our minds a one-sided and warped image of God - one that is in line with our own unholy inclinations and desires. Not only is this perilous self-deceit, but it is the essence of idolatry.

### The God of indescribable mercy

There are more than forty sins in the Bible which by law carried the death penalty. These include sins like beating one's parents or swearing at them, abduction, partaking in occult practices, homosexuality, practising false prophesy, idolatry, not keeping the Sabbath and slander.

To us this may seem harsh, brutal and repulsive. *But in fact this Old Testament list of*

*capital sins represents an astounding relaxation of God's original decree. In fact, it is proof of His remarkable grace!*

In order for us to understand this statement, we need to go back to the beginning. In paradise, before the fall, God pronounced the death sentence in the clearest possible way on man should he eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gn 2:17; 3:3). In spite of that man ate from the tree and although he suffered spiritual death, he remained physically alive - at least for many years - due to God's forbearance. And immediately after man's sin God instated the covenant of grace. The point is that man received a clear warning, which he ignored by sinning, and therefore forfeited any claim to life. *God is under no obligation to let any man live.*

In the light of the foregoing the deepest mystery regarding sin is not that the sinner deserves to die, but that the ordinary sinner is allowed to live for so long. The question is not why God punishes sin, but why He allows man's ongoing rebellion to continue for so long. Would any earthly monarch allow this?

Now the picture becomes clear: the Old Testament is not in the first place a history of an angry God. On the contrary! It is the history of God's extreme patience! *The Old Testament is the fanfare of God's indescribable grace!*

Why is God so patient? Why is he withholding the guillotine of His wrath? The Bible spells it out quite clearly: *So as to give sinners the opportunity to repent.* Does He not state unequivocally that He takes no pleasure in the death of anyone? (Ezek 18:32 and elsewhere). Is it not so that the sacrificial system served as a temporary covering of the people's sins until Christ would deal with it once and for all? The original meaning of "reconciliation" (Hb *kaphar*) is, after all, "to cover".

## Two further problems

It would be easy to show that all the people who

died so horribly in the Old Testament were indeed guilty by God's standards. But we are still faced with two problems.

### **1. Why do we find such a vast difference between the ways in which God reveals Himself in the Old and the New Testaments?**

Firstly we must understand that we have to do with one and the same Person in the two Testaments. The Lord Jesus calls the God of the Old Testament "Father". It is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of whom John says that He sent His only begotten Son because of His love for the world. The zeal that was in God when Nadab and Abihu died, was the same zeal that burnt in Jesus Christ when He overturned the tables in the temple.

Secondly, we have to understand that this is all about a difference of degree. We see so much more of God's grace in the New Testament, but equally true, also so much more of His wrath. God's wrath as depicted in Revelation is more terrifying than anything anywhere in the Old Testament.

The only difference between the Old and the New Testaments is that the latter brings the character of God into focus more clearly.

### **2. Why do only some people die, while the majority live on?**

People tend to take grace for granted in the course of time. Eventually they even demand it. That is why God finds it necessary to make examples of certain people so as to remind us of the fact that He is holy, that He hates sin, and that the period of grace is the time to repent.

Because God's normal way is that of patience and grace, people are offended by the momentary flashing of His wrath. They are no longer amazed at His grace, they have become accustomed to it. In fact they demand it. Instead of repenting, people abuse the time of grace by persisting in their sinful ways and boldly cross boundary after boundary. The greatest wonder of our day is God's patience

with sinners. In their foolishness they think that they will get away with their rebellion. They still believe Satan's lie: "You will not surely die" (Gn 3:4).

## God's call to repentance

The Word of God repeatedly calls us to repentance while we live in the time of grace. Let us then heed the Lord's voice in verses like the following:

- 2Pt 3:9: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."
- 2Kor 5:20: "We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."
- 2Kor 6:2: "I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation."
- Isa 55:6: "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near."
- Isa 55:1-3: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. ... I will make an everlasting covenant with you ..."

## Nico van der Walt

- Nico van der Walt subscribes to the historically respected and internationally recognized 1689 Baptist Confession - like most Reformed Baptists worldwide - as well as the Confession of Sola 5, an association of God-centred evangelicals in Southern Africa.
- Weekly a sermon/study like this is sent world-wide and free of charge in Afrikaans or English by e-mail to 2000 people who have requested it.
- Subscriptions, changes of address, cancellations and correspondence: E: [duplessismh@telkomsa.net](mailto:duplessismh@telkomsa.net); P.O. Box 35289, Menlopark, 0102, South Africa. Tel. 012-804 0316; 083 5544 941.
- [www.reformed.org.za](http://www.reformed.org.za) [www.nunide.org.za](http://www.nunide.org.za) [www.sola5.org](http://www.sola5.org)
- No copyright. Please duplicate or forward electronically.
- Past E-sermons can be found on the first website above.
- We gladly send an introduction to the sermons to those E-addresses you might wish to send us. However, we only put those people on our mailing list who request so personally.