



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Divine Wrath  
and Human Anger  
(*Anger*, pp. 37-45)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Righteous Indignation  
(*Anger*, pp. 56-57)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# Divine Wrath and Human Anger

Embarrassment over references to God's ire is not a recent phenomenon or the product of modern religious sensibilities. Early Christian theologians were deeply sensitive to the destructive consequences of human anger, and feared it would be the context in which believers came to understand divine wrath.

## Prayer

Scripture Reading: Exodus 32:1-20 and 34:1-9

## Reflection

"Scripture is replete with references to divine indignation," Michael McCarthy notes. "How we should appropriate images of God's wrath is far from obvious." Some Christians relish them: they claim that certain wars, terrorist acts, AIDS, and natural disasters are signs of God's wrath today, and they may even use the images to justify their own violent actions. For other Christians, the references to divine wrath are an embarrassment; in many churches they are omitted from Lectionary readings.

For insight in interpreting these difficult passages, McCarthy turns to four North African theologians in late antiquity who "were deeply sensitive to the destructive consequences of human anger. They worked within a social and intellectual environment that placed great emphasis on the virtue of humans to control their rage. Furthermore, they saw that the terrible experience of human anger often supplied the context in which many readers of the Bible would come to understand divine wrath."

- ▶ *Arnobius of Sicca* (d. 330) *denies God's wrath on philosophical grounds: it would compromise God's sense of justice. "To be angry, Arnobius says, is to be insane, to rage, to be carried away into the lust for vengeance, and to be in a frenzy by alienation of the heart. Such gods would be worse than beasts, monsters, and deadly snakes that can contain their poison." He does not wrestle with scriptural texts that imply divine anger. But his position shows the great difficulty they posed for theologians in late antiquity.*
- ▶ *Tertullian* (d. 225) and *Lactantius* (d. 320), *like most early Christian thinkers, defend God's wrath by insisting it is radically different from our anger. "The anger endemic to so many processes of human society," McCarthy explains, "operates in profound ignorance and employs mechanisms of brutality even in the name of justice. God's anger, they say, is not like that."*

Tertullian believes God's wrath is required for divine justice and reveals God's will to save. We are often overcome by anger, but only "[God] can be angry without being shaken, can be annoyed without coming into peril, can be moved without being overthrown."

Lactantius makes a similar point: due to his kindness, God expresses "affections of virtue" like anger toward the wicked, love toward the good, and compassion for the suffering. Fear of God's wrath serves the common good by reminding humans of the demands of justice. He writes, "[C]onscience greatly checks people, if we believe we are living in the sight of God; if we realize that not only what we do is seen from above but also what we think or say is heard by God."

- ▶ *Augustine* (d. 430) *agrees divine wrath is part of God's justice. References to God's wrath might signify "the divine power to punish, the*



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correction a person endures painfully when he or she recognizes estrangement from God, an inveterate sinner's darkness of mind toward God, or even God's raising up anger within a person who recognizes that someone else is violating the divine law," McCarthy notes. We must be careful in ascribing anger to God: it's not really an emotion, but a judgment on sin that causes a range of emotions—guilt, shame, fear, zeal—in us. "If we can speak about God having emotions, it is only by analogy *or* in relation to the human emotions experienced by Christ, who represents to Augustine the model affective life." This view lets Augustine "deny that God ever suffers anything like human anger while maintaining, on the other hand, the narrative integrity of the Bible and a theological claim of God's ultimate justice."

"The ancient concern was overwhelmingly to show that God decidedly does not act the destructive way that angry humans frequently do, wreaking harm on their social inferiors. Many of the patristic writers attempted, rather, to create a space where references to God's wrath may be regarded as part of God's providence, leading people to greater life, justice, and well-being," McCarthy concludes. "Human rage cannot be the frame wherein we come to understand what God's anger means."

### Study Questions

1. Consider why Michael McCarthy chooses the early theologians of North Africa for his study of divine wrath and human anger. What two general strategies did those theologians employ to avoid the projection of human fury onto God?
2. Why, according to Tertullian, Lactantius, and Augustine, does the Bible speak of God's wrath? What different messages do the wicked and the righteous hear?
3. Discuss McCarthy's claim that we live "in a world where misguided rage can easily masquerade as righteous indignation, [and thus] it is no small thing to exercise great caution when we are tempted to project our wrath onto God."
4. What elements of the story in Exodus 32:1-20 and 34:1-9 are depicted in Domenico Beccafumi's *Moses Breaking the Tablets of the Law*? Discuss the relation between divine wrath and human anger in this story.

### Departing Hymn: "O Come, My Soul, Sing Praise to God Our Maker" (vv. 1 and 2)

O come, my soul, sing praise to God your Maker,  
and all within me, praise his holy name.  
Sing praise to God, forget not all his mercies,  
his pardoning grace and saving love proclaim.  
*Praise him, you angels, wondrous in might,  
praise him you servants who in his will delight.*

Good is the Lord and full of kind compassion,  
most slow to anger, plenteous in love.  
Rich is his grace to all who humbly seek him,  
boundless and endless as the heavens above.  
*Refrain.*

*Psalter* (1912), alt.

Tune: TIDINGS

# Divine Wrath and Human Anger

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To outline how early Christian theologians interpreted scriptural references to God's wrath.
2. To consider the dangers of projecting human fury onto God.
3. To discuss how divine wrath and human anger are depicted in the story of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments from God.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Anger (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Oh Come, My Soul, Sing Praise to God Our Maker" locate the familiar tune TIDINGS in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Quote

The theologian John Cassian (c. 360-435) taught that "the deadly poison of anger...must be totally uprooted from the depths of our soul." He thought that a literal reading of Scripture passages about God's wrath was especially pernicious. "We have heard that some people try to excuse this most destructive disease of the soul [the vice of wrath] by attempting to extenuate it by a rather detestable interpretation of Scripture," Cassian warned. "They say that it is not harmful if we are angry with wrongdoing brothers, because God himself is said to be enraged and angered with those who do not want to know him or who, knowing him, disdain him." Cassian believed the language of Scripture is rather oblique on this point: it does not mean to say that God sometimes is angry, but that wrongdoers who properly fear God's righteous judgment sometimes project anger onto God. (He noted a parallel phenomenon occurs in human courtrooms: even though a righteous judge carries out a fair sentence with mildness and gentleness of spirit, wrongdoers mistakenly believe the judge is filled with cruelest anger.)

It would take "too long if we chose to explain everything in Scripture that is said figuratively and in human terms about God," Cassian concluded. "Let it suffice to have said this much with respect to our current concern, which is directed against the vice of wrath, so that no one may, through ignorance, derive the wherewithal for sickness and everlasting death from the very place [i.e., Scripture] where holiness, immortal life, and the medicine of salvation are obtained." (John Cassian, *Institutes*, 8.1-4)

Regardless of whether we agree with Cassian's view that anger is always wrong (and, we should note, our difference of opinion on this may be mostly terminological), does he have a legitimate concern about the misuse of Scripture? Are we tempted to read biblical accounts of God's wrath as justifying our inordinate fury and uncontrolled outbursts against wrongdoers?

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God will give you spiritual insight to interpret difficult Scripture passages regarding divine wrath.

### Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Exodus 32:1-20 and 34:1-9 from a modern translation.

### Reflection

The other studies in this series focus on *human* anger – its causes, spiritual dangers, and sometime positive role in the life of discipleship. This study turns to the scriptural references to *divine* wrath. Often we are tempted to project human fury onto God and, in turn, use references to God’s wrath to justify our own inordinate anger. This unhealthy connection between divine wrath and human anger is widespread today. Michael McCarthy points to resources in the Christian tradition that can help us resist it.

### Study Questions

1. Michael McCarthy surveys these theologians because North Africa in late antiquity “produced a form of Christianity with a distinct temperament.” Africans had worshiped Saturn, a demanding god they called “The Old Man.” He was not a loving father, but a stern taskmaster who (in the words of W. C. H. Frend) was “capable of the worst human passions, of implacable jealousy, rage, and desire for vengeance.” Thus, McCarthy notes, “A spirit of religious intensity, a concern for purity, and an emphasis on submission to the divine will antedated conversion but also endured through the persecution of the church. North Africa, with its stress on martyrdom and the multiple divisions among Christians after persecution, yielded a religiosity where both human and divine rage remained ever a threat.” To avoid projecting human anger onto God, North African thinkers adopted one of two strategies: a few (like Arnobius) denied that God experienced anger, but most (like Tertullian, Lactantius, and Augustine) claimed a radical difference between divine wrath and human anger.
2. The passages that mention divine wrath are written to teach important lessons to readers. For Tertullian, the Bible speaks of God’s wrath in order to communicate God’s goodness, justice, and willingness to save. Lactantius takes a similar line, and then adds another teaching purpose: mention of God’s wrath stirs fear in humans that discourages them from foolishness and crime. Likewise, Augustine sees divine wrath as an aspect of God’s justice. Yet it is not an emotional disturbance in God, but is the divine judgment against sin. McCarthy explains, “God’s anger, therefore, is not unlike the simulated wrath of a Stoic or Epicurean sage, who never suffers disturbance, yet who gives the impression of being angry because of its salutary effect on others. Just like the sage, God can always mete out just punishment without being inflamed.” Of these three theologians, Augustine is the one most interested in the effect that the language of divine wrath has on human responses. Such passages can stir zeal in good persons to take the sin and rebellion of others seriously and to act against those persons and their damage to the creation. For sinners, on the other hand, these passages can be the darkening of their minds.
3. Encourage members to mention examples from history and cases from recent news of people and nations who claimed that God’s wrath justified their violence.
4. Domenico Beccafumi’s *Moses Breaking the Tablets of the Law* depicts Moses smashing the second tablet of commandments (Exodus 32:19), as there are pieces of the first one already strewn over the rock. The calf is shown in silhouette in the middle of the composition. None of the figures is clearly Joshua (who is in conversation with Moses just before and after this event), but all around there are reveling people who now draw back from Moses in fear. The image does not depict the events before (e.g., the people grumbling and then urging Aaron to make the calf; Moses assuaging God’s wrath on Mount Sinai) or after (Moses grinding down the calf and making the people drink its dust; God giving another copy of the commandments; Moses singing praise to God for being slow to anger and ready to forgive the people). Yet there are suggestions of the wider story: the man and woman in the foreground are reminders of the people’s “reveling” before the calf, and the child may foreshadow the spiritual damage done to their children and children’s children (Exodus 34:7).

### Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.