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04. 1 Thessalonians 1:7-10

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7so that you became an example to all the believers in
Macedonia and in Achaia. 8For the word of the Lord has
sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but
in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we
have no need to speak about it. 9For the people of those regions
report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and
how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true
God, 10and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised
from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is
coming.

1 Thessalonians 1:9

‘you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God

This reminds us of the opening lines of the Ten Commandments: ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol … You shall not bow down to them or be enslaved by them’ (Exodus 20:1-5).

The ‘living and true God’ is Yahweh, the God of the Exodus, the redeeming God, the God and Father of Jesus. Just as the Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt, so the Thessalonians were enslaved by state religion. They were also slaves of their own misguided passions and of ignorance. Liberated through their acceptance of the gospel, they now live in hope.

10 Jesus rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

To understand the meaning of the expression 'the wrath that is coming' we should recall the heightened expectation among the various strands of Judaism of the first century of our era that God was about to intervene in history to bring about the reign of God on earth. The fulfilment of God's promises and the vindication of Israel also meant the final destruction of the forces of evil that oppose God's will. It is this aspect of destruction of evil that is conveyed by the word 'wrath'. Because they recognised Jesus as God's Messiah, and in light of the resurrection of Jesus, this heightened expectation was even more acute among Christian Jews. As we shall see in the following chapters, they spoke in terms of the imminent 'coming of the Lord Jesus the Messiah' (see 2:19, 3:13, 4:15, 5:23), or of the 'coming of the Son of Man' (Matthew 24:27).

The language of divine 'wrath' is traditional. To deepen our understanding it is necessary to examine the tradition. To do so we must first realise that the authors of the Hebrew Scriptures looked at the events of history at two related but distinct levels. There is the human level of cause and effect. Good actions have good effects, bad actions have bad effects, and we are responsible for the good or the evil that we do; hence for the effects that follow, for ourselves and for others.

The prophets, however, saw history also from a higher viewpoint. Without denying human freedom, they understood that the ultimate cause of everything that happens in this world is God. Furthermore, they thought of God as controlling the world such that nothing happens without God's will. It is God who determines the outcome of a battle. It is God who determines the seasons. It is God who causes famine and plague. When good things happen, it is God who is blessing us. When bad things happen it is God who is punishing us.

A key conviction that we find in the Hebrew Scriptures is that God is just. This means that God can be trusted to act always according to God's nature. The Scriptures show that the people were still struggling to free themselves from the many conflicting images of God that prevailed in the surrounding polytheistic cultures. We find many images of God in the Bible that are not easily reconciled in a harmonious way. However, among all the different images, the dominant one is of God as a liberator and a saviour. God, for the Israelites, is the God of Moses, the God of the Exodus, the God who redeems from slavery, the God who cares for the widows and the orphans, the God of mercy, the God of faithful love. 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them' (Exodus 3:7-8).

The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin' (Exodus 34:6-7).

Of course, since God is just, God must act not only according to who God is, but also according to who we are. God must punish sin. The above text continues: 'yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation' (Exodus 34:7).

They thought that though God must punish, God never stops being a God of love: 'How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath' (Hosea 11:8-9).

'Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favourable? Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?' (Psalm 77:7-9).

'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness' (Lamentations 3:22-23).

God is a saving and redeeming God. When we sin, we cut ourselves off from God, but we cannot stop God loving. This means that the aim of God's punishment is that we change and renew our communion with God: that we repent and live. 'For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. For the Lord has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off, says your God. For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer' (Isaiah 54:5-8).

When the Bible speaks of God being angry (the 'wrath of God') it is stressing that God's relationship to us is not that of a cold, uninterested observer. Ours is a passionate God. We must distinguish clearly between two quite distinct forms of 'anger'. One form of 'anger' is the anger of losing one's temper. Sadly, this is common among us and arises from a failure in patience. It is self-centred. It is a vice. This kind of anger is never predicated of God.

There is, however, another kind of anger which rises up and overwhelms us when we see someone we love hurting themselves or hurting others. It is an intense, passionate and unselfish concern, and a powerful means of bringing about change. We see this kind of anger in Jesus as he attempts to break through people's pride and prejudice. This is the kind of anger that is predicated of God. Both kinds of anger are passionate. The key distinction between the two is that divine 'anger' arises from a passionate love.

The God of the Exodus cannot stand by and watch people whom God loves destroying others and destroying themselves. God cares enough to be angry. The divine anger blazes out, flamed by holiness and justice and a passionate love that seeks to break through our resistance to the truth: a love that tries to free our minds and hearts from what is closing them to the light, as nature bursts the kernel to let in light and warmth and to release the seeds of new life. If we are humble, if we are contrite, if we repent, we will respond and open ourselves to God's redeeming action in our lives. Then we will experience this divine 'anger' as a burning and purifying love. If we stubbornly remain in our sin, we will experience it simply as anger.

We began this reflection by noting that the authors of the Hebrew Scriptures looked at history on two levels: that of the divine, overarching providence, and that of human cause and effect. In relation to sin and punishment, and so in relation to the theme of the 'anger of God' we find this exemplified in many texts. Take, for example, psalm seven. Verses twelve and thirteen portray God as the one punishing us for our sins; verses fourteen to sixteen identify the punishment as being the result of our sinful behaviour:

'If one does not repent, God will whet his sword; he has bent and strung his bow; he has prepared his deadly weapons, making his arrows fiery shafts. See how they conceive evil, and are pregnant with mischief, and bring forth lies. They make a pit, digging it out, and fall into the hole that they have made. Their mischief returns upon their own heads, and on their own heads their violence descends' (Psalm 7:12-16).

To this point we have been reflecting on the justice of God, the punishment of God and the anger of God as we find these expressions in the Old Testament. If we read some passages of the New Testament from within the same perspective, we might understand these expressions in the same way. However, the revelation of God that we receive by listening to and contemplating Jesus involves a radical shift in the way in which we look upon God, and so a radical shift in the way in which we understand terms like 'punishment' and 'anger' in relation to God.

Jesus reveals God as a God of love. We find this, as we have already noted, also in the Old Testament. The difference is that now God's love has the effect upon other images of God like the effect that the rising of the sun has upon the light emanating from the stars. God's love is such that every other image of God has to be re-thought.

We no longer think of God as controlling the world. God loves the world, and love does not control. God has made us free and respects our freedom. If we choose to reject God's love, God will not stop loving us; but neither will God force this love upon us. Our rejection of God's love, our choosing to live without this love, affects our lives and the lives of those around us. On a perfectly sunny day. I might choose to pull down the blind and so plunge myself in darkness, shutting out the rays of light which would otherwise stream into the room. My pulling down the blind does not stop the sun shining. If I change my mind and lift the blind, I will be immediately bathed in light. So it is with us and God. God's love is unconditional. We can choose to reject it and God respects this choice. We can plunge ourselves into darkness, but we cannot alter God's love.

It remains true that God is just. God, therefore, cannot pretend that things are other than they in fact are. We are meant for light, not for darkness. We are created to live in God's love. The darkness into which we plunge ourselves through sin is unnatural. We are ill at ease. The darkness itself can be a reminder that we are meant for the light. In this sense the effect of our sin can be spoken of as 'punishment', so long as we recognise that it is self-inflicted. It is not something which God inflicts upon us from the outside. The prodigal son in the parable of Jesus ended up in a pig yard as a consequence of his dissipation. This was a 'punishment', but not something inflicted on him by anyone other than himself. Certainly not by his father. If we speak of it as punishment 'of God', we are not saying that God is the cause; rather that it is a self-inflicted punishment that affects our relationship with God.

The Catholic catechism has this to say about the ultimate punishment, hell.

> To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from God for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called 'hell' (Catholic Catechism n.1033).

The mystery is that we are able to resist love and so can die an eternal death. Paul knows that to do so we must break through the loving arms of Jesus extended on the cross, for Jesus gave his life to save us from our sins (see Galatians 1:4), whether it be through the last-minute promise to a dying thief (Luke 23:39-43), or the last-minute appeal to a desperate Judas (Luke 22:48).

If, in the light of the revelation of God given us by Jesus, we continue to speak of the 'wrath of God', we have to re-think what it is we are saying. If we are thinking of God, then we are speaking of God's passionate love which opposes evil in all its manifestations. God uses even the effects of human sin to attract the perpetrators of sin and their victims to a life of divine communion.

If, on the other hand, we are referring to our human experience when we reject grace, then we are speaking of the pain and anguish which we experience when, resisting God's purifying love, we stubbornly remain within the bounds set up by our disobedience. We project this feeling on to God as 'anger', because of the analogy with how we feel when another person is angry with us. In this sense the anger is 'of God' in the same sense in which we spoke earlier of punishment being 'of God'. It is our relationship with God that is affected. We are speaking of the impenetrable darkness which we experience when we shut out God's light; of the hopeless despair which we experience when we refuse the freedom offered us by God; of the incapacity to receive or to give love which we experience when we deliberately and persistently reject God's offer of love.

The key problem here is the problem of human hardness of heart and obstinacy of will in refusing God's gracious love. This is the most baffling of mysteries: the mystery of evil, the mystery of our capacity to refuse love, the mystery of human pride that refuses liberation, the mystery of a self-centredness that becomes so opaque as to shut out the light of divine love. Jesus often spoke of it and begged his contemporaries to repent, that is to say, to open their minds and hearts to God's grace and to allow love to change their ways. Otherwise we face an eternal darkness. His words, coming from one so gentle and compassionate, force us to face the fact of sin and its consequences in our lives.

It is from these consequences that Jesus would save us, not by any suggestion that God turns a blind eye to our transgressions, but by the amazing truth that God offers us a love which will transform us, attracting us away from sin and towards the communion which alone can satisfy our hearts. Jesus loves us in such a convincing way that we will dare to say Yes to love in our lives. When Paul speaks of Jesus delivering us from the wrath, he is referring to God's decisive revelation of his love in Jesus, through whom God offers us a love which will transform us, attracting us away from sin and towards the communion which alone can satisfy our hearts.

Let us now return to Paul's text. He speaks of 'the wrath that is coming'. During the period of the writing of the Hebrew Bible, death was thought of as the end of life. We notice an alteration of this perspective beginning in the Book of Daniel (12:1-3) and in the Second Book of the Maccabees (6:18ff), both of which works were influenced by the heroic martyrdom suffered by faithful Jews during the religious persecution of 168-165BC. The obvious injustice of their death, and the equally clear truth that it could not be interpreted as the consequence of their sin, forced into consciousness, as it were, the idea of a life-beyond-death in which those who suffered unjustly in this life would enjoy the reward of their fidelity, while their persecutors, who often seem to prosper here, would have to suffer the results of their sin.

Furthermore, in Jewish writings of the second and first centuries BC, we find the idea emerging that God was soon to bring about the decisive age of history, when there would be a renewed heaven and a renewed earth, because God's kingdom would be realised and God's will would be done. In this new age God's justice would reign, the good would be rewarded and the evil punished. Since these ideas express attempts to explore beyond the horizon of the authors' present experience, we are not surprised to find that the language which they use to speak of this definitive age is highly imaginative and symbolic.

Speculation concerning the nature of reward ('heaven') and punishment ('hell') varies from one writing to another. The common element in all this speculation was that divine justice would one day be manifest. It is to this judgment that Paul is referring. He believed that Christ was risen from the dead, and that the resurrected Jesus reveals God's design for the human race. Because of the close link in the minds of Paul's contemporaries between resurrection and judgment, it is understandable that Paul would see Jesus' resurrection as the beginning of the promised new age.

The fulfilment was expected to be imminent. God's ultimate design for the world was about to be realised. It is obvious now, and it gradually became obvious even during Paul's life, that there is no close time-link between the resurrection of Jesus and the full realisation of history's goal in which God's will would be done 'on earth as in heaven'. We should not be surprised, however, to find such an expectation in the early years of the Church's life.

We imagine it differently today, but we share with Paul the hope that history will issue in the vindication of Jesus and of all that he stands for. We share with Paul the conviction that what we do matters and that our future is determined by whether we accept God's love or obstinately reject it. We share with him the belief that Jesus has redeemed us from sin and from its consequences, and we, too, look forward in hope to the renewal of the world and to living with the exalted Jesus in the glory of God our Father.

The opening chapter of First Thessalonians encourages us to seek to spend our life in the presence of God (see 1:3). It encourages us also to reflect upon the actual effects which acceptance of the Gospel is having in our personal lives and in the life of our family and parish community (see 1:5). We might call to mind some of the significant people who have modelled Christ for us (see 1:6-8). We might ask how we handle suffering? Do I pray for the joy of the Holy Spirit to sustain me in continuing to love through it (see 1:6)?

Finally, Paul challenges us to examine our faith. Do I believe that God's love is truly unconditional and that it Jesus who continues to grace us so that we may be freed from the evil effects of our own and other people's sinful behaviour (see 1:9-10)?