

From Wrath to Rest

by James Stewart

As Christ's ambassador and spokesman, bearing a royal commission and authority, and charged with the vast responsibility of representing his Master to men, Paul made this his constant message and appeal—"Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20). Here, as everywhere, his own experience was decisive.

On the day when Jesus met him, the peace for which through bitter years of battle Paul had yearned in vain came to him as a sudden, miraculous benediction: the man in Christ now knew himself to be right with God. And with the clearness of vision of a soul redeemed he saw that, if for him the estranging barriers had fallen, there was no reason why they should remain standing for any of the sons of men. If his own restless and distracted heart had found its perfect rest, then on that same breast of God there must be rest for all the world. Reconciliation—and fellowship with God—became his theme.

It has always been the fundamental postulate of religion that *man is made for fellowship with God*. To have communion with his Creator—this is his nature and the very purpose of his existence. He bears God's image. He hungers and thirsts after righteousness. Deep calls to deep, and the eternity within the soul reaches out hands of faith and kinship to the eternity that is in God. It is man's glory to live in this world as a child in his Father's house. It is God's glory to declare, "*When Israel was a child, then I loved him*" (Hos. 11:1). "*Can a woman forget her child? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget you*" (Isa. 49:15). Man fulfills his destiny when he is at one with God and lives in the light and love of that high fellowship.

But religion has always recognized that there is one factor in human experience which has the fatal power of disturbing this fellowship. That factor is sin. Of all sin's consequences, by far the most serious is the loss of fellowship with God which sin involves. It brings a cloud across the sun. It interrupts the family relationship. Purity of heart sees God; anything which smirches the purity necessarily spoils the vision. What makes sin an essentially lonely thing is not the separation of the sinner from his brother men or even from his own best self: it is his isolation from God. This is what Paul calls "*alienation*." He charges his converts that they "*walk not as other Gentiles walk . . . alienated from the life of God*" (Eph. 4:17,18).

This condition of alienation has various stages and degrees. It begins with a vague feeling of estrangement. The soul becomes aware of a barrier which has mysteriously arisen between itself and God. It realizes that although in the actual sin there may have been no intention of wounding God, indeed no conscious thought of God at all, still the relationship has subtly changed. "*Against You, You only have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight*" (Ps. 51:4). Unless the evil is dealt with, the sense of fellowship is going to be radically impaired, perhaps even ruined forever. Inevitably the barrier rises, and the fellowship is broken. The soul is alienated.

In Paul's own case, the sense of alienation was connected with his experience under the Law. He had failed to fulfill the Law's requirements. Conscience told him that he would never succeed. And yet the Law was the will of God. How, then, could lie hope to escape the divine displeasure? Must not God be angry with him? Was not this stinging sense of guilt itself a symptom of God's wrath? And would not that wrath consume him utterly on the great day of final judgment? Had he not sinned too often and too deeply ever to be forgiven? Had not the friendly relationship vanished too completely to be restored? Fellowship with God—were not the very words a mockery? When Paul described the bitter experience of estrangement he was describing what he knew.

Now it often happens that alienation of this kind hardens into resentment. The soul in its bitterness turns and accuses God. It lays the blame for the estranging barrier at God's door. Has it failed to observe the Law? Then the fault is God's who has pitched His demands so unreasonably high. Is God almighty, and the soul itself but feeble? That only serves to increase the resentment. Thus failure breeds hopelessness, and hopelessness begets recklessness, and recklessness becomes downright hostility. The man who was made for the highest fellowship now stands over against his Creator as an enemy.

By this disturbance of life's central relationship, all its other relationships are deranged and thrown out of gear. To be wrong at this one point is to be wrong all along the line. Clearly it is here that any redemption which claims universal validity must be tested. Can it deal with this alienation? Can it remove the enmity? Can it achieve at-one-ment? This is the decisive test.

One thing was needful, one thing without which all the other glories of redemption must remain sterile and unavailing—the restoration of the lost fellowship with God. Man wants more than the remission of his sins, more than an escape from inward accusations, more than the crossing of his Red Sea and the vision of his Egyptians lying dead, more than a ransom from the wrath to come. He wants to be right with God. He wants to be back in the family again. He wants, in a word, *reconciliation*. Any Gospel that offers itself to a sinning, suffering world must stand and be tested here. This is the real test. It is, quite literally, the "crucial" test: for at the heart of it lies a Cross.

The word which Paul uses to describe the peace with God into which his union with Christ ushered him is *katallasso*, and it means the establishing of friendly relations between parties engaged in a quarrel. Now clearly there are more ways than one in which such a peace-making may happen. Much depends on the nature of the estrangement. If the resentment has been mutual, then fellowship can be re-established only when both parties agree to put their angry feelings away. If the enmity has been on one side, harmony may be restored either by a deliberate change of feeling in the hostile mind, or by a friendly approach from the other side which disarms antagonism. Reconciliation, when it is between man and man, can and does take place along these different lines.

It is of the utmost importance to determine the line along which it comes when it is between man and God. Other religions make use of this idea: and it is significant that all of them take it for granted that God is the one who requires to be reconciled. Is this, then, the conception with which Paul is working? When he speaks of reconciliation, is he thinking of a change in the attitude of God? Or is it a mutual process which he has in view? Or is it man—not God at all—who needs to be reconciled? In reconciliation, is man the subject and God the object? Or *vice versa*? Or is the process mutual?

Christianity is not to be understood by the analogy of any other faith whatever: if we think to understand it so, we are sure to blunder badly. It is much too independent and original. With one voice the pagan creeds declare that man must take steps to reconcile his God, and so restore himself to favor. Christianity cuts clean across this, and declares the exact opposite. *God is the Reconciler*. God, in His changeless and unwearying love, has taken the initiative, has broken into the atmosphere of man's hostility, and has thrown down every estranging barrier that guilt and hopelessness and dull resentment can erect. That the willing God seeks to bring unwilling men to His holy fellowship is the uniform teaching of the Scriptures, and the heart of the Gospel. The answer to our question about subject and object stands out clear: it is God who reconciles, man who is reconciled.

This undoubtedly is Paul's position. His own words are plain and unequivocal. "*God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself*" (2 Cor. 5:19). A God who needs to be reconciled, who stands over against offending man and waits until satisfaction is forthcoming and His

hostility is appeased, is not the apostolic God of grace. He is certainly not the God and Father of Jesus Christ.

Paul himself, at one period of his life, had been almost sure that God's face was set implacably against him; but there came a day when he learned how wide of the mark this deeply rooted notion of a hostile God had been. It is the very nerve of Paul's Gospel, that while we are yet sinners, "enemies," openly hostile and downright rebellious, "*God commends His love toward us*" (Rom. 5:8), proves His love by doing what One animated by feelings of antagonism could never do, and sacrifices what One who was hostile could never sacrifice. Ours, says the Apostle, is the enmity; and therefore ours— not God's—the need to be reconciled. But what about the statement: "*The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men*" (Rom. 1:18)? Does this mean that God, having been wronged, cherishes a resentment against the wrongdoer? Surely, then, God has to be pacified before fellowship can be restored?

Paul speaks of "*Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come*" (1 Thes. 1:10). "Wrath" is a word which very readily suggests angry, vindictive feelings: but surely it ought to be clear that the resentment which one man who has been offended frequently bears towards another who has offended him has no analogy in God whatever.

What Paul means by the wrath of God—in its present, non-eschatological sense—is the totality of the divine reaction to sin. Everything that man's rebellion against the moral order brings upon him —suffering for his body, hardening for his heart, blinding for his faculty of inward vision—is included in that reaction. Is this punishment? Yes, certainly; but it is not God's outraged dignity retaliating by a direct, penal act. Rather it is the sinner who punishes himself. Charles Kingsley's vivid way of putting it was that men "punish themselves by getting into disharmony with their own constitution and that of the universe; just as a wheel in a piece of machinery punishes itself when it gets out of gear" (*Letters and Memories of His Life*, p. 204). If Kingsley's imagery is modern, the spirit is entirely Pauline.

To think of God as growing angry and inventing punishments for the offender is to misconceive the situation entirely. Paul's thought, like that of the New Testament in general, is much nobler, much simpler, much more solemnizing. "*This is the judgment, that light is come*" (John 3:19)!

In this interpretation of Paul's meaning, there is no intention of minimizing the seriousness of the divine attitude to sin, or of regarding it as anything other than life's sternest reality. God's will has expressed itself in the very constitution of the universe; and therefore it is inevitable that evil, wherever and in whatever shape it appears, should feel the full weight of the divine reaction.

God's wrath is not understood until it is seen as the obverse of His grace. God's wrath is God's grace. It is His grace smitten with dreadful sorrow. It is the passion of His heart going forth to redeem. Of God no less than of man it is true that "*He that goes forth and weeps, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing His sheaves with Him*" (Ps. 126:6).

Paul speaks always of man, not God, being reconciled. Doubtless when the reconciliation is accepted and the estranging barrier disappears, a new situation arises for God as well as for man. If the experience makes a difference to the forgiven, it must also make a difference to the Forgiven "*There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents*" (Luke 15:10). It is true that something happens on the divine side, no less than on the human. It is also true that the redeeming death of Christ, which means so gloriously much for man, means more than mortal mind can ever fathom for God. Where

reconciling has to be done, God is always the subject, never the object. This is Christianity's distinctive glory. And "*be reconciled to God*" is its challenge.

No other position was possible for a man like Paul in whose thinking grace—that is to say, the divine initiative—was fundamental. Everything in religion that matters starts from God's side. Even faith and penitence and prayer, three attitudes of soul which might appear to originate in man and to be human virtues, are, if we believe Paul, nothing of the kind: they are God's creation, God's gift—faith, because it is evoked by the action of God in revealing Himself as worthy of all trust; penitence, because it is produced by that divine reaction to sin of which the Cross is the culmination; and prayer, because when "*we know not what we should pray for as we ought . . . the Spirit itself makes intercession for us*" (Rom. 8:26).

The passion and hunger *for* God comes *from* God, and God answers it with Christ. Man's intelligence and will and heart and conscience never initiate anything in religion; and over the best moral and spiritual triumphs of this life the saints can only cry, "*Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Your name give glory*" (Ps. 115:1). Of ourselves we can do nothing: there is no Creator but God.

*And every virtue we possess,
And every victory won,
And every thought of Holiness,
Are His alone.*

This is the meaning of grace, and this is the inmost secret of reconciliation. Jesus proclaimed God's initiative first and last, who was Himself God's initiative become flesh, whose eyes were like a flame of fire to those who would propitiate God by their gifts and offerings and character, whose face smiled the welcome of heaven to those who confessed they had no standing before God at all, who did not wait till sinners sought Him but went forth to seek them first, who lived to bring the gift of reconciliation near to men, who died to put it in their hands. No man who is too proud to be infinitely in debt will ever be a Christian. God gives forever; forever man receives. Is it incomprehensible that the holy God should thus deal with unworthy man? For me, Paul would say, religion began on the day when I ceased straining and striving and struggling for heaven's favor, and was content to bow my head and accept the gift I could never win. "*It is all the doing of the God who has reconciled me to Himself through Christ*" (2 Cor. 5:18, Moffatt).

When Paul thinks of reconciliation and peace with God, *the thought of the Cross is never far away*. He speaks of Jesus "*reconciling men unto God by the Cross*" (Eph. 2:16), "*making peace through the blood of His Cross*" (Col. 1:20). Why this continual emphasis? Wherein did the reconciling power of the Cross lie? Too often there has been a tendency to regard the Cross as in itself the assurance of salvation, apart altogether from the earthly ministry that went before it and the resurrection that came after. But everything depends on a man's union with a living, present Savior. Paul makes it clear that in the absence of that union, even the Gospel of the Cross loses its saving efficacy: "*If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; you are yet in your sins*" (1 Cor. 15:17).

Atonement remains impersonal and largely irrelevant until we make contact with the One who atones: and contact of a vital kind is possible only if Jesus is risen and living now. Hence the New Testament writers refuse to treat either the death or the resurrection of Christ in isolation. When they speak of the Cross, they see it ever in the light of the Easter glory; and when they speak of the resurrection, they set it against the dark background of the Cross. Paul's words are typical: "*If, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His Life*" (Rom. 5:10). "*Who is he that condemns? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again*" (Rom. 8:34).

To be genuinely reconciled to God is to see all mankind with new eyes. It is to have "*the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost*" (Rom. 5:5). It is to have the living Christ within, which means to feel towards others as Christ would lead towards them. It is to be raised above all dividing barriers and all the pettiness of spirits unredeemed, into a realm of wider horizons and ampler air, where "*there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Gal. 3:28).