



Can an Angry Judge Be Just?

OUR FAIR AND FURIOUS GOD



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Why must God's perfect justice in dealing with law-breakers be accompanied with a furious anger? Isn't justice enough? Why "the heat of this great anger" ([Deuteronomy 29:24](#))?

It is conceivable that a just judge could deliver a guilty verdict and fitting sentence without feeling anger at the condemned criminal. In fact, ordinarily the sentence is more likely to be just, if the judge keeps his emotions out of the proceedings, and reckons the sentence solely on the basis of law.

We can imagine that thirty years later the punishment of the condemned criminal would still be happening long after the judge has forgotten the case. That would be fitting, since the feelings of the judge were not the basis of the sentence.

In ordinary criminal law, the anger of the judge has no place in determining the punishment of the criminal. The question before the court is guilt or innocence. Conviction or acquittal. Condemnation or justification. These are based on facts, not feelings. Does the evidence show that, beyond a reasonable doubt, the defendant committed the crime? How the judge feels is not legally relevant.

However, this separation between the process of justice and the emotion of the judge does not describe the biblical reality of God's judgment of sinners. He is just and angry. Fair and furious. This article aims to show why.

God Is Just

To be sure, the Bible is adamant that the ways of God are just. “All his works are right” ([Daniel 4:37](#)). “His work is perfect, for all his ways are justice” ([Deuteronomy 32:4](#)). “Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means!” ([Romans 9:14](#)).

And his ways are just precisely as the Judge. “You have come . . . to God, the judge of all” ([Hebrews 12:22–23](#)). “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” ([Genesis 18:25](#)). “The Lord . . . is not partial and takes no bribe” ([Deuteronomy 10:17](#)). “He will render to each one according to his works. . . . For God shows no partiality” ([Romans 2:6, 11](#)).

God Is Just in Passing Over Sin

Indeed, at the very heart of our Christian faith is the death of the Son of God, in the place of sinners, to show that God is just in passing over sin.

God did not sweep the sins of his people under the rug of the universe. He punished them. He condemned them, once and for all. “By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh” ([Romans 8:3](#)). That means we do not bear the condemnation for our sins. Christ did. Christ “was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities” ([Isaiah 53:5](#)). And there is no double jeopardy.

The reason God required a divine substitute in passing over our sins was to demonstrate his justice. A just judge cannot acquit the guilty — unless the law can be upheld, and the acquitted can be transformed, and the judge can be vindicated. That is what the death of the Son of God secured.

God put [Christ] forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s [justice], because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his [justice] at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. ([Romans 3:25–26](#))

God Is Just in Punishing Sin

The judge of all the earth always acts justly. That includes the condemnation of those who do not receive his way of salvation through the death of Jesus. Against such people “God’s righteous judgment will be revealed” ([Romans 2:5](#)).

God’s judgment on the unbelieving proceeds according to God’s law. Judgment falls “because they have rejected the law of the Lord” ([Amos 2:4](#)). “. . . because they have forsaken my law” ([Jeremiah 9:12–14](#)). “. . . because they have transgressed my covenant and rebelled against my law” ([Hosea 8:1](#)). They have become a law to themselves in choosing what to do, and “the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things” ([Romans 2:2](#)). And in all this judgment, “God shows no partiality” ([Romans 2:11](#)).

One could say God is the model judge.

But the Judge Is Furious

But this is not the whole picture. What are we to say about the anger of God — the anger of the divine Judge? What about the fury of his wrath against the defendants ([Romans 2:8](#))? This is what makes God's judgment very different from an ordinary human court of law.

It was crucial that we establish the perfect justice of God's proceedings. What follows does not call that into question. God remains just. But not like a human judge. In God's courtroom, the Judge is furious. He is not out of control. He is not carried along by irrational emotion. His fury is perfectly aligned with reality. It corresponds with the God-belittling horrors in the affidavit of every defendant.

In ordinary human courts, a judge who feels personal fury toward the defendant would likely recuse himself. But in the divine court, wrath and fury are perfectly fitting. "For those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury" ([Romans 2:8](#)).

God's Justice Is Expressed in Wrath

For some reason, this wrath is not a threat to justice. In fact, it is part of it. The wrath does not undermine God's justice; it expresses it. You can see this in the way wrath and judgment are linked. "Because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the *day of wrath* when God's *righteous judgment* will be revealed" ([Romans 2:5](#)). God's "righteous judgment" — his perfectly just verdict — will be executed on the day of his *wrath*. Wrath does not undermine justice. It expresses it.

God's righteous judgment and his just punishment happen in the pouring out of his wrath. "I will soon pour out my *wrath* upon you . . . and *judge* you according to your ways, and . . . punish you for all your abominations" ([Ezekiel 7:8](#)). "Your wrath came, . . . the time for the dead to be judged" ([Revelation 11:18](#)). Just *judgment* happens in holy *wrath*.

Impartial Judge, Enraged Judge

So, the question rises: Why do we have these two pictures of God — the God of perfect justice in judgment, and the God of wrath and fury? How do they fit together?

One picture focuses on the Judge's perfect fairness, impartiality, and objectivity, so that truth is perfectly honored, and all the evidence is carefully weighed, and punishments justly rendered. The other picture focuses on the disposition of the Judge — his anger and wrath and fury at the defendants.

Is it not enough that God is a perfectly just Judge who "judges impartially according to each one's deeds" ([1 Peter 1:17](#))? Would this not be enough to account for the condemnation of the world ([Romans 5:16](#)), and for the justice of hell ([Romans 3:5–8](#)), and the glory of the cross ([Romans 3:25](#))? No, it would not. Why?

Why Is Fury Fitting?

It has to do with the ultimate source of what makes something right. God as a just judge meting out just sentences on the basis of just laws does not account for the origin of the laws and the ultimate ground of what is right. When we trace God's righteousness or justice all the way back, we don't stop with the existence of God's law. The law has roots. Laws are good or bad for reasons more basic than law. Tracing the rightness of law back to its ultimate source reveals why wrath and fury are essential to the divine judgment.

What is "right" for God is not determined by a standard outside himself. That is one of the deepest difference between creature and Creator. Creatures know what is right by conforming to the Creator. The Creator knows what's right by conforming to himself. What does that mean?

The God who takes his name from the most basic statement "I am who I am" ([Exodus 3:14](#)) is without beginning, without ending, and without becoming. He is absolutely self-sufficient. Absolutely complete. Without defect. Therefore, God not only *has* absolute value; he *is* absolute value. All value is measured by conformity to his value.

Thus, God's infinite worth is the most ultimate basis of what is right — right for man, and right for God. "He cannot deny himself" ([2 Timothy 2:13](#)). That is, God always thinks and feels and acts in a way that conforms to his infinite worth. This is his holiness. As Stephen Charnock (1628–1680) quaintly said, God's holiness is that he "works with a becomingness to his own excellency" (*The Existence and Attributes of God*, 115). What is right for God is what is "becoming" (suitable, fitting, proper, appropriate) to his infinite worth and beauty and greatness.

God's Anger: Holy Reflex of God's Jealousy

One of the things that is "becoming" for a God of infinite worth is to feel jealous when his beauty and worth and greatness are spurned for lesser things. The Bible shows that jealousy — God's zeal that his worth and glory be known and cherished in a becoming way — is part of who God is: "The Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" ([Exodus 34:14](#)). And the Bible makes plain that God's jealousy flows from his holiness — his all-satisfying, transcendent perfection. "I will be jealous for my holy name" ([Ezekiel 39:25](#)). "He is a holy God. He is a jealous God" ([Joshua 24:19](#)).

And just as God's jealousy is rooted in his holiness, so his anger is rooted in his jealousy. "They have made me jealous . . . they have provoked me to anger" ([Deuteronomy 32:21](#)). "They provoked him to anger with their high places; they moved him to jealousy with their idols" ([Psalms 78:58](#)). "The anger of the Lord and his jealousy smoke" ([Deuteronomy 29:20](#)). "The Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God" ([Deuteronomy 4:23–24](#)). "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" ([Hebrews 10:31](#)).

The anger and wrath and fury of God are the "becoming" response when his infinite personal value is scorned, insulted, and belittled. This belittling of God is, in fact, what all human beings do in the way we treat God. All have sinned and belittled the glory of God by preferring mere created things ([Romans 3:23; 1:23](#)). Thus, we all are children of wrath ([Ephesians 2:3](#)). And God's wrath burns against the human race ([John 3:36](#)) — which is the backdrop for his sending his Son in love to rescue us from his wrath ([Romans 5:9](#)).

Justice Vindicated, Jealousy Satisfied

Therefore, God is not only a just Judge dealing with people who break his laws; he is a glorious Creator whose creatures have spurned his infinite value for lesser things. Therefore, human beings are not just breaking laws; they are scorning, insulting, belittling their Maker who offers himself freely through Christ to all who thirst for him as their greatest satisfaction ([Isaiah 55:1–3](#); [John 6:35](#)).

What this shows is that God's double response to impenitent sinners of justice and fury ([Romans 2:8](#); [Hebrews 10:27](#); [Revelation 16:19](#); [19:15](#)) reveals more fully the greatness of his glory. His response of perfect justice, as an impartial judge administering his laws, reveals his perfect rectitude and uprightness. No one is ever treated by God worse than one deserves. The punishment of hell is just.

God's response of jealous wrath and anger and fury reveals his infinite personal worth and the intensity of his passion to display, uphold, and share his beauty with those who will have him as their Treasure.

In providing salvation for his people through the death of Christ, God vindicates his justice and satisfies his jealousy. His justice is vindicated because forgiven sin is duly punished. His jealousy is satisfied because he obtains and purifies a people who treasure him above all things forever.