

June 29, 2014

Saints Peter and Paul

### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Church has always thought of God's wrath as a metaphor descriptive of His "negative response" to sin. The expression signifies the metaphysical incompatibility of moral evil with the Font of goodness. When the Bible, then, speaks of God's anger, it indicates His extreme, punitive displeasure toward what is radically opposed to His being.

If God's wrath is understood in that way, it is clear that no one can placate or appease it. That is to say, it is metaphysically impossible for God to become---somehow---less angry in regard to sin. The Lord's "negative reaction" cannot be other than it is, because it is an expression of His intrinsic truth. As long as God is God, sin must be the object of His wrath. Nothing done on this earth---nothing accomplished by Christ himself---alters the divine nature. Consequently, it is impossible for the biblical God to be other than the 'El qanna'---the "jealous God" (Exodus 20:5).

Holy Scripture also indicates, however, that God does, on occasion, "turn away" from His anger. "Many a time," it is said, "He averted His wrath" (Psalms 78 [Greek 77]:38). What averts God's wrath---what prompts Him to forgive sins---is invariably man's repentance.

Chosen as one example among hundreds, 2 Chronicles 29 illustrates the point. When Judah had roused the divine wrath by a succession of infidelities,, King Hezekiah called the nation to repentance and proposed a renewal of the Covenant, so that, the king said, "His fierce wrath may turn away from us."

A century later, Jeremiah gave Hezekiah's experience the force of a principle, declaring that if a "nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil (mera'ato), I will relent of the evil ('al-hara'ah) I proposed to bring upon it" (Jeremiah 18:8).

Even the pagan Ninevites---to whom Jonah spoke not one word of hope on the matter---suspected this to be the case: "But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God. Indeed, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may yield and relent and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?"

In all the Bible, I can think of no exceptions to this pattern: Man repents, God forgives.

Most often, moreover, this repentance is expressed in prayer, as in the case of the Ninevites. For example, Psalm 107 (Greek 106) tells of four punishments from which God's People were delivered when they prayed.

Perhaps the best-remembered case of repentant prayer is the one ascribed to the deeply-humbled David, who was convinced that the Lord would not despise a broken and contrite heart. When David turned to the offended Lord, he prayed, not that God would calm down, but that He would avert His face: "Avert Your face from my sins---Haster paneka meachta'ai" (Psalms 51 [Greek 50]:11). The sacrifice God required of him, David knew, was a broken and contrite heart, and such was the sacrifice David offered. Here, as all through the Bible, divine forgiveness was the response to human prayer.

Repentant prayer is how man averts the wrath of God. There is no other way.

Indeed, it is useful to consider this Davidic psalm in more detail, inasmuch as the Church has always appealed to it in connection with the forgiveness of sins. David prays to be washed thoroughly from his iniquity and cleansed from his sin. He begs to be purged with hyssop and made whiter than snow. According to this prayer, the required sacrifice is the turning of the mind and soul to God. The true burnt offering is a broken heart.

The one who prays this psalm, then, is certainly aware of the divine wrath; He is familiar with God's radical displeasure. He knows his guilt, and he confesses his offense. He is praying, moreover, to be forgiven and restored.

What the repentant soul seeks here, then, is more than the wrathful Lord's turning away His face from the offense of sin. Salvation in this psalm consists in more than the removal of "blood guilt" (damim). The man who makes this prayer his own is asking for communion with God: "Restore to me the joy of Your salvation."

This is a plea for the renewal of the Holy Spirit. The psalmist is explicit on the point: the goal of repentance is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit through purity of heart. The one, indeed, is not separable from the other: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew inside me the righteous Spirit (Ruach nakon). Cast me not away from Your face, and take not Your Holy Spirit (Ruach qadsheka) from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and sustain me with the kindly Spirit (Ruach nedibah)."

What the repentant sinner seeks here is true Atonement, a genuine being-at-one with God through the Holy Spirit. He is not asking for God's declaration of righteous but for inner transformation. What he seeks is restoration to God's friendship.

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