

DISPENSATIONAL RESOLUTION: UNDERSTANDING GOD'S WRATH AND RECONCILIATION ACROSS BIBLICAL AGES

Series: A Little Bit of This...A Little Bit of That
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Today we'll explore an apparent biblical contradiction and its resolution through dispensational theology. The tension between Romans 1:18-20 and 2 Corinthians 5:19 can be understood by examining God's dealings with humanity across three key dispensations:

- The Patriarchal Age (from the Fall to Moses)
- The Legal Period (Moses to Paul)
- The Age of Grace (Paul to the Rapture)

By examining God's wrath through these distinct periods, we'll discover how these seemingly contradictory passages actually reveal different aspects of God's progressive revelation to humanity.

PATRIARCHAL (FALL TO MOSES)

1. Acts 17:30 – “God winked at” the ignorance of man

“And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent” (Acts 17:30 KJV).

The Greek term translated as “winked at” (*ὑπεριδών*, HUPERIDON) conveys the sense of “overlooking” or “taking no notice of.” During this era, God did not impose a detailed legal code; rather, He generally tolerated human ignorance. This does not suggest He was entirely passive toward sin, but that He refrained from a systematic or frequent outpouring of wrath, and even from revealing the ultimate day of judgment and wrath. Instead, He reserved more severe interventions for instances of overt defiance that threatened the core of His revealed plan.

2. Rare demonstrations of wrath in this dispensation

Even while “winking at” mankind’s broad ignorance, God occasionally intervened with judgment when humanity’s rebellion reached a catastrophic level in regard to His revealed plan. Three notable examples are the Flood, the Tower of Babel, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. These serve as exceptions rather than the norm in a period where God largely withheld formal legal structures.

○ The Flood

“And GOD said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them...” (Genesis 6:13 KJV).

The rampant corruption before the Flood jeopardized the lineage leading to the promised “seed of the woman” (Genesis 3:15). God’s judgment ensured humanity would not completely sink into irreparable corruption. This cataclysm was not routine, but a drastic measure to preserve the promise.

○ Babel

“And the LORD said... let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad...” (Genesis 11:6–8 KJV).

After commanding mankind to multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 9:1), God found an organized rebellion at Babel that worked counter to His directive. He intervened by confounding human language, illustrating that while He overlooked much ignorance, He would halt unified opposition to His declared will.

○ Sodom and Gomorrah

“...the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the LORD exceedingly” (Genesis 13:13 KJV).

The moral degradation of these cities blatantly violated the foundational standard from Genesis 2:24 (one man and one woman). The fire that fell from heaven was not an everyday occurrence but a decisive response to unrestrained corruption.

3. Disturbance of God's stated plans

These extreme cases show humanity actively thwarting or endangering the Creator's purposes. At each juncture, once fundamental boundaries were crossed in a way that threatened the broader plan, God judged accordingly. Yet apart from these major upheavals, He generally "winked" at widespread ignorance of righteousness.

LEGAL (MOSES TO PAUL)

1. Romans 1:18–20 – Man now without excuse, God's wrath revealed

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness... so that they are without excuse" (Romans 1:18–20 KJV).

The word "revealed" translates the Greek ἀποκαλύπτεται (APOKALYPTETAI), meaning "to uncover" or "make fully known." Unlike the Patriarchal Age, where God "winked" at certain ignorances, here He openly displays His righteous opposition to sin. Once the Mosaic Law was instituted, Israel—and by extension, all observers—could see explicit prescriptions for holy living. Violations brought direct consequences, removing any plea of ignorance.

2. What wrath is revealed during this dispensation?

In the Mosaic era, God's wrath was codified in tangible laws and punishments. Levitical and Deuteronomic regulations outlined curses on Israel if they rebelled (Deuteronomy 28), and provided for immediate judgments (e.g., capital punishment for specific sins). This period highlights that once God set forth His righteous standard, transgression was no longer excusable in the same sense as before.

○ Warning of wrath to come

The Mosaic Law did not merely point to immediate penalties; it also foretold future judgments. Prophets spoke of a looming "DAY OF THE LORD" (Isaiah 13:6, Joel 2:1, Amos 5:18) when God's wrath would be poured out more broadly. Though that ultimate day may extend beyond the Mosaic timeframe, its warnings originate in this dispensation, emphasizing that God's standards were now on record.

○ No more winking—now a righteous standard

Where the Patriarchal Age involved limited direct revelation, the Law spelled out moral, ceremonial, and civil directives. This effectively removed plausible deniability. Much of Romans 2–3 amplifies this point: whether Jew or Gentile, everyone becomes accountable under God's righteous decree.

○ Acts 17:30 – "Now commandeth all men every where to repent"

"And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent" (Acts 17:30 KJV).

Although this verse is part of Paul's message at Mars' Hill (post-Resurrection), it reflects the transition from a less codified era to one where sin is clearly defined and humanity is called to repentance. From Moses onward, people had sufficient revelation to realize their spiritual peril and heed the voice of repentance.

3. A coming "day of the Lord" and "day of judgment"

While direct judgments like plagues, exiles, and national calamities demonstrated God's wrath in the Mosaic period, the Law and the Prophets consistently pointed to a larger, eschatological judgment yet to unfold. Thus, the Mosaic Law period warns that God's wrath is not merely a matter of historical record (as in the Flood or Sodom), but a future certainty.

This era showcases that humanity, armed with a clear standard, is left without excuse and confronted with both immediate and future retribution for sin. This sets the stage for the Age of Grace, where God’s method of dealing with sin is transformed, though not in conflict with His holiness or prior revelations.

GRACE (PAUL TO THE RAPTURE)

1. 2 Corinthians 5:19 – The World Reconciled

“To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:19 KJV)

The Greek verb translated as “reconciling” (καταλλάσσω, KATALLASSŌN) implies a complete change of reality. In this Age of Grace, God has taken down the fundamental barrier that once stood between Himself and humanity. Although the ultimate provision for sin is universally available, it must be proclaimed. Hence, Paul adds, “**AND HATH COMMITTED UNTO US THE WORD OF RECONCILIATION.**” The gospel message is not automatically apprehended by all; people must hear it, believe it, and act upon it.

The plea, “**BE YE RECONCILED,**” underscores the reality that the benefits of reconciliation remain unclaimed if one does not respond in faith. Reconciliation is thus both a completed act—God has done His part—and an open invitation, requiring a personal decision.

2. Ephesians 2:8–9 – The Gift for All

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.” (Ephesians 2:8–9 KJV)

This dispensation highlights that salvation is a gift, freely extended to anyone—Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free—upon the single requirement of faith. God’s work in Christ has stripped away restrictive barriers. Yet a gift must be received to yield its benefits.

○ Additional Passages

- **COLOSSIANS 1:20–22** similarly depicts Christ’s reconciling work that alters the believer’s status from alienation to holiness.
- **HEBREWS 2:8** suggests that, though all things are now put under the authority of Christ, we do not yet see the full realization of His rule. In the same way, while reconciliation has been accomplished, the experiential benefit requires individual acceptance.

3. Not a Revelation of Wrath, but of Grace

Contrasted with previous dispensations, Paul’s message does not reveal God’s wrath. Instead, it reveals a window of grace—an era in which sins are “not imputed” to those who accept the atoning work of Christ. Wrath is not absent from God’s overall timeline—Scripture prophesies a future day of judgment—but this present period places God’s gracious offer in the forefront.

This shift clarifies apparent contradictions between passages like **ROMANS 1:18–20** and **2 CORINTHIANS 5:19**. Wrath was undeniably revealed under the Mosaic Law and even in specific instances during the Patriarchal Age. However, Paul’s announcement of reconciliation shows that, in this Age of Grace, God has chosen not to exact immediate judgment for trespasses. Instead, He extends mercy, with the ultimate penalty for sin deferred until a future time. Thus, the character of God remains consistent: holy and just, yet also patient, offering peace and reconciliation to all who will receive it.

PUTTING THESE MESSAGES SIDE BY SIDE

1. Patriarchal: “Walk in the little light you have. Do not threaten My redemptive plan. Trust My promise of the seed.”

Genesis 12:1–2 “Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation...”

2. Legal: “Here is My law in full detail. Obey or reap the consequences, for ignorance is no longer an excuse.”

Acts 3:14–15, 19 “But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; And killed the Prince of life... Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out...”

3. **Grace:** “Your trespasses are not imputed if you will receive Christ’s finished work. Believe on Him, and you are reconciled.”

Acts 13:38–39 “Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.”