Dear Julie,

Thank you for your email and the reference to Herbert McCabe regarding our understanding of the love and vengeance of God.

I have given some thought to what you have said and in particular your reference to the parable of the prodigal son, as I believe there are some important matters to consider.

First of all I agree that we can have mistaken ideas about God and in particular when we attribute to Him the kind of feelings and emotions that we ourselves experience. However I do not believe we can conclude from this that the vengeance and wrath of God, as spoken of in the scriptures, are simply mistaken human perceptions of Him.

I believe we must allow the scriptures to speak for themselves and seek to understand what God has revealed concerning Himself.

The parable of the prodigal son

Now with respect to the parable of the prodigal son, which is recorded in Luke chapter 15, there are several things that I think are important.

We are told at the beginning of the chapter that the publicans and sinners drew near to hear Jesus, and the Pharisees and scribes murmured saying, "This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them."

It was in response to this complaint that the Lord Jesus gave the three parables concerning the lost sheep, the lost piece of silver and the prodigal son.

All three illustrate the recovery of that which was lost and the joy that followed.

We are told:

> *"I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance." Luke 15:7.*

Now the younger son had left his father's house and taken with him the portion of goods that fell to him. He went into a far country and wasted his substance with riotous living.

When he had spent all there arose a mighty famine in that land and he began to be in want.

I see in this the providence of God, whereby this young man was brought to an end of himself and all his resources. He had lost everything and was in

such a miserable condition that he would have been glad to fill his belly with the husks that the swine did eat.

It was then that he came to himself.

He remembered his father's house and the provision that was there, even for the hired servants, and he began to consider returning home.

Now it is important to notice his state of mind.

He no longer considered himself worthy to be called his father's son, nor did he return expecting to be restored to all the privileges he had formerly enjoyed.

He was prepared to acknowledge his sin and ask to be made as one of the hired servants.

This I believe demonstrates a right state of mind, being brought to repentance and freed from any sense that he deserved to be received back into his father's house.

However the response of the father is remarkable.

We are told:

> *"But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." Luke 15:20.*

The father had not ceased to love his son because of his wilful and woeful behaviour.

He did not meet him with resentment or demand that he should first suffer further for what he had done. Rather he rejoiced in his return.

For as he said, "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

Here I believe we have a wonderful demonstration of the grace, mercy and love of God towards a returning sinner.

The elder brother

But the parable does not end there.

We are introduced to the elder son who had remained at home and, as far as he was concerned, had faithfully served his father and had not transgressed his commandments.

Yet when he heard of his brother's return and the celebration that had taken

place he became angry and would not go in.

He considered that his younger brother had received far more than he deserved, having wasted his father's living.

Now I believe this is the very point that the Lord Jesus was making to the Pharisees and scribes who had complained that He received sinners and ate with them.

The elder brother demonstrated a self-righteous and legal spirit. He considered himself to have been a faithful keeper of his father's commandments but his attitude towards his brother demonstrated something very different.

For the Apostle Paul tells us:

> *"Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." Romans 13:10.*

And again we read in Galatians 5:14:

> *"For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."*

Now the elder brother may have considered himself to be a good keeper of the law, but his resentment towards his brother showed that he had failed in the very thing which the law required, namely love.

He had no joy in the recovery of his lost brother and was offended at the gracious behaviour of his father.

This I believe was the error of the Pharisees, who considered themselves righteous but failed to understand the grace and mercy of God shown towards repentant sinners.

The vengeance of God

Now coming back to our original discussion concerning the vengeance of God.

I do not see that this parable teaches that the vengeance of God is a mistaken perception of His character.

It is not really dealing with the subject of divine vengeance at all, but rather demonstrates the grace and mercy of God in receiving sinners who repent.

I think it is important to distinguish between the vengeance of sinful men and the righteous vengeance of God.

Men often seek vengeance because they have been offended, injured or moved by anger and resentment. Their actions may well be sinful and unjust.

But this cannot be said of God, who is righteous in all His ways.

We are expressly told in Romans 12:19:

> *"Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."*

Here the Apostle Paul forbids us from taking personal vengeance, but at the same time declares that vengeance belongs to God.

So the scriptures do not deny the vengeance of God, but rather teach that it is His prerogative and not ours.

And there is another scripture which I think is particularly important.

In 2 Thessalonians 1:7–9 the Apostle Paul speaks of the Lord Jesus Christ being revealed from heaven with His mighty angels:

> *"In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ:*
>
> *Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power."*

Now these are not the words of an Old Testament prophet who may have had a mistaken understanding of the character of God, but the words of the Apostle Paul speaking of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

I therefore cannot see how we can regard the vengeance of God as a mistaken human perception when the apostles expressly teach it.

The love of God revealed in Jesus Christ

This brings me to what I believe is the most important part of the matter.

The gospel of Jesus Christ does not deny the righteousness and justice of God, nor does it teach that God has simply overlooked sin because He is a God of love.

Rather the gospel demonstrates the wisdom of God in providing salvation for sinners whilst maintaining His righteousness.

We are told in Romans 3:25–26 that God has set forth Jesus Christ to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness, so that He might be just and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.

Now I believe this is of great importance.

For had God simply overlooked sin, without any satisfaction of His justice, what would become of His righteousness?

But in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ we have the wonderful demonstration of the love of God towards sinners and at the same time the righteousness of God in dealing with sin.

The Lord Jesus Christ came to save His people from their sins and in doing so accomplished a redemption that satisfies the claims of divine justice.

This is the glory of the gospel.

We are not saved because God has ceased to be righteous or because His judgment against sin was a mistaken perception of Him.

We are saved through the redeeming work of the Lord Jesus Christ, who suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God.

It is therefore my understanding that the love of God and the vengeance of God are not opposed to each other.

They are both revealed in the scriptures and must be understood in harmony with all the other attributes of God.

The same Lord Jesus Christ who spoke so graciously concerning the prodigal son is the One whom the apostles tell us will be revealed from heaven in righteousness and judgment.

I do not believe we are at liberty to accept one part of this revelation and reject another simply because it does not accord with our own feelings or perceptions.

I would therefore be interested to know how you understand those scriptures which expressly speak of the vengeance of God, particularly Romans 12:19 and 2 Thessalonians 1:6–9.

I believe this is an important matter because our understanding of God must be governed by what He has revealed concerning Himself and not simply by what we may think His character ought to be.

These are my thoughts on the matter and I trust they may be of some help in considering the subject further.

Kind regards,

David