

## Gospel Shaped Church (5) – The Very Core of the Gospel

In this last verse of chapter one Paul introduces the idea of Christ's return, something he returns to in each chapter, with the greater detail being in chapter's 4 & 5. Each time he raises it we learn something different about the day of his return. Here we learn that he will deliver us from the wrath to come - **"Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come..."** What does Paul mean by **"wrath to come"**? That is the all important question. What does Jesus deliver us from exactly? What is in the mind of Paul when he writes this phrase? Some think he is talking about the wrath they were facing from those who opposed the gospel in Thessalonica. Others believe it refers to the Great Tribulation, and see this as a promise of deliverance from it. However nowhere else in Paul's writings or in the NT is the Greek word translated wrath used to refer to persecution.

Gordon Fee writes; *"It is of interest that the word "wrath" is used exclusively in the NT to refer to God's final judgement on the wicked, & thus is never used regarding believers, whose present lot is "tribulation/suffering."* Completely different words are used in the Greek. The word translated wrath is always to do with God's judgement & the other word translated as tribulation, affliction or suffering is to do with the present trials of believers. If we mix these up then I believe we will end up with biblical inaccuracies regarding present suffering & the return of Christ.

No Christian is presently suffering because God's judgement is on them. We might be suffering because of bad or sinful choices we have made. We might be suffering simply because we live in a broken & sinful world. We might be suffering because we're being faithful to God in a world that doesn't want to know him. We might even be experiencing the Lord's discipline which is connected to his love in Hebrews not his wrath. If we are his we are certainly not experiencing his judgement. In Christ God's righteous judging wrath has been turned to eternal favour & that means we will never again know what it is to be under the condemnation of God. And when Jesus comes again to exercise God's final judgement (which we all deserve) we will know him as our deliverer from that judgement because he first came to secure our salvation from it.

No matter what we face in this life we can face it with the complete assurance that in Christ we will never face what we deserve from God because of our sin – his coming wrath. Christ is our eternally safe refuge, our emergency exit from the judgement we deserved. So yes life in this world can be hard & life in this world can be unfair & on a human level we don't always get what we deserve. Some of us experience this more than others, but because of God's love for you in Christ you are saved from a lot worse – the judgement of God. Let that sink in! This is a worse we & you do deserve, a worse which would only be the fair justice & judgement of a holy God on our sin. But Christ stood in our place, drank the cup for us, shed

his blood to atone for us & now we are free from condemnation forever. How can this be? What is the cost?

The wrath of God at human sin is an inescapable theme that runs through all of Scripture – Old & New Testaments. We see it most clearly in passages like Noah & the flood, Sodom & Gomorrah, God delivering his people from Egypt, God's judgement on Nineveh as prophesied by Nahum. Jesus draws on some of these OT examples to help us understand what Paul here describes as the wrath to come. Jesus warned in Matt 10:15 that if a town did not receive his apostles or listen to their message **“it will be more bearable on the day of judgement for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.”** These Thessalonians could know they had a deliverer for this day because they welcomed the message of God brought by Paul. **We can also turn to Matthew 24:37-44.** Note here that the context is the wicked being swept/taken from God's creation not the righteous. Jude in verse 7 of his short letter says Sodom and Gomorrah **“serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire”** (NIV). 2 Peter 2:6 teaches that it is **“an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly.”**

Paul is telling us that for those who welcome the message of the gospel into our lives, Jesus has become our future deliverer from the wrath to come. How? Well to find the answer to how he is our future deliverer we need to go back & look at how he secured it on the cross.

In producing his famous translation of the Bible, William Tyndale introduced many words & phrases to the English language. Phrases like *“the salt of the earth”* & *“the powers that be”*. Tyndale also had a passion for choosing the best words possible for capturing Biblical truth. Sometimes this even meant inventing new words. One such word is *atonement*, which was introduced because he could find no word in English he felt did full justice to Christ's saving work on the cross. The word *reconciliation* came close, yet he felt it expressed the result of Christ's work without saying enough about how Jesus dealt with the sin problem.

The word *atonement* is another way of saying *reconciliation*; however it says it while including what Jesus has done to reconcile us to God. Peter sums the concept up beautifully when he says; **“Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God”** (1 Pet 3:18 NLT)... We can capture all that & much more in one word because of Tyndale's word - atonement. The idea of atonement is also an idea that runs right through Scripture.

The word atonement quickly became shorthand for Christ dying on the cross to restore us to God. But we also need to recognise there are different aspects to the *atonement*, all of which are worth exploration. Romans 3:23-25 mentions three aspects of Christ's atoning work. Justification, redemption & propitiation! Justification is a legal term & it is to do with God declaring us righteous. Redemption is a marketplace term & it is to do with Jesus paying our debt. Propitiation, which is our word for now, has to do with Jesus absorbing God's wrath for us. All of these concepts are part of Christ's atoning work for us & they are all

accomplished only because of his precious blood which was poured out for us when he was nailed to that cruel yet beautiful cross. Cruel because of what it cost him, beautiful because of what it secured for us.

Propitiation is not a word we tend to use a lot today, however it is the best word we can find to capture this vital aspect of the atonement. The basic meaning of the word is *“satisfaction or appeasement of God’s wrath, turning it into favour.”* God’s righteous anger at our sin needed to be appeased as well as forgiven. A holy God cannot turn a blind eye to sin any more than a good judge can to crime. Christ accomplished this appeasement on the cross by absorbing the full weight of God’s wrath on our behalf so that we could have eternal favour with God. We sing of the concept of propitiation when we sing the following words from verse two of *In Christ Alone* - *“And on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied - For every sin on Him was laid; here in the death of Christ I live.”*

One reason we might not hear too much about propitiation today is because talking about it means addressing the most awkward attribute of God, namely his wrath & those things associated with it – judgement, hell & even the cross itself. It leads to awkward conversations & questions in a culture which knows little of God’s holiness. However the wrath of God is one of the most frequently mentioned attributes of God in the Bible, even though it is one of the least mentioned in contemporary Christianity. In the NT references to God’s love, God’s wrath and Jesus’ death are often mingled together (John 3:16-18, 36; Rom 5:8-9; Eph 2:1-5).

A reason some may struggle with this aspect of God’s character is we assume wrath & love are opposites. People say things like *‘how can a loving God punish people’* or *‘I believe God is love, not wrath.’* This assumes wrath & love are opposites. However the opposite of wrath is not love, but indifference. Think about it: If you and I went for a walk around the Holocaust Museum and felt no anger about the inhumanity of it, would that suggest we are loving or unloving? Or, if a man is not bothered by his wife having an affair does that reveal how much he loves her, or how little? You see love & righteous anger go together. If you love justice injustice makes you angry. What kind of God would we have if he looked out over all the earth with no anger towards all he sees? Would that make him more loving or less loving?

Another reason we may struggle with God’s wrath is because we automatically think of it in terms of human anger. But when we talk of God’s wrath, it’s not the same as saying he is impatient or irritable etc like we often are. God does not have a bad temper. He is longsuffering; otherwise none of us would still exist! However, while he is longsuffering he is not ever-suffering. His wrath is always perfectly measured, controlled, appropriate & completely justified. When we talk of God’s wrath we need to avoid watering down its ferociousness & we need to avoid making God out to be a bad-tempered moody deity who is waiting with his omnipotent power to punish sinners for every wrong move. God is neither soft with sin nor bad-tempered with sinners... The cross displays this perfectly...

One of the complaints people make about God is that he sits back and doesn't intervene & deal with wickedness in the world. Another is that the God of the Bible wiped out wicked cities in the OT. Often it's the same people who complain about both. A person can criticise God for not judging enough, & then for judging too much. But you cannot have it both ways. Either God is a God who deals with all injustice, unrighteousness and sin, or he is indifferent towards it. BUT if God is a God who deals with all sin... then surely that means he must not only deal with the wrongs done in the world & in history, but also with the wrongs in our lives. Anything less falls short of perfect justice – because of the sin in all our lives we deserve to experience the judgement & wrath of God to some degree.

Thankfully Romans 5:9 reveals we can be saved from God's wrath by Jesus! The cross gives us a picture of what we are saved from as much as it gives us a picture of God's love for us. It gives us a picture of what we would have to face ourselves if Christ had not taken our place & made propitiation for our sins. It also gives a person a glimpse of what they will face for all eternity if they reject Christ. For there is no other way to be saved apart from Christ crucified – Jesus is the only emergency exit! There is no other Propitiation. This is how Jesus demonstrated his love: He absorbed the wrath of God at our sin so we don't have to & now we can know the favour of God forever. This should fill our hearts with eternal gratitude. 1 John 4:10 says; ***“In this is love, not that we have loved God... but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”*** This is the good news & it is the ultimate act & definition of love!

One side of the cross reveals God's mercy & love while the other reveals his justice and wrath. And if we do not hold up both sides then we misrepresent the nature of God. The cross displays the perfect harmony of the attributes of God more than anything. This is why Paul calls the message of Christ Crucified ***“the testimony about God”*** (1 Cor. 2:1). Nowhere is the character of God more clearly displayed than in Christ on the Cross. His sacrificial love, perfect justice, abundant mercy, redeeming grace, unsearchable wisdom, perfect righteousness & his holy wrath at sin are all there on full display...

A while ago I was struck by the words of Jesus in John 12:27; ***“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour.”*** He was wrestling with what he was going to go through. The Greek signifies this was an ongoing disturbance in his soul. So it's likely that the whole time he was ministering to others – healing the sick, eating with notorious sinners, serving & teaching people – he was struggling with what he would have to endure. He knew the plan of salvation hung entirely on him hanging on a cross & he knew the wrath of God more than anyone.

Here's the thought that moved me as I meditated on these words: Jesus knew the intensity of God's holy wrath more than anyone... But knowing fully the separation he would face, knowing fully the pain & the agony he would endure, knowing fully he was going to take the full weight of the wrath of all-powerful God he did not turn back. He drank the full cup of our condemnation. The full punishment for every sin, every

crime, every wrong & every injustice ever committed... No one knew the ferociousness of God's wrath at sin more than Jesus. For, he shared completely his Father's wrath at sin yet he still became sin for us.

***"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us"*** (Gal 3:13).

It's not that the Father was the angry one & the Son stepped in to save us. God – Father, Son & Holy Spirit – are equally & righteously angered by our sin but because of the depth of love for us our Triune God came up with the only plan that could satisfy perfect justice & secure our salvation. In becoming sin for us then Jesus became what he hated most & was condemned for it because he loved us more. In this way alone, & in him alone, we have certain hope of deliverance from the wrath to come.

You and I cannot possibly take it in. We can understand enough for our hearts to be filled with gratitude, but there are depths to Christ's suffering we will never fathom. However he understood completely the sheer magnitude of what he was to face, and with love stronger than death & stronger than the anguish he was going through he went all the way & became our substitute, taking our place as the guilty one, staying on the cross until the wrath of God was satisfied & with His last breath he was able to cry ***"It is finished!"*** This is how Jesus delivers us from the wrath to come.

We have this hope because Jesus became our propitiation. Justification, redemption, propitiation... & we could add other words which help capture the glorious gospel realities of what Christ has done for us. Never let people convince you Christian doctrine is unimportant... These are core gospel truths Satan does not want you to understand. For if you only get these words, what the Bible teaches about them regarding Christ & you as the believer, then every doubt the enemy hangs over your salvation will fall to the ground... Words like this one capture the wonderful realities of the gospel in a way we can hold onto. They silence the voice of the enemy & assure our hearts over & over again that things are eternally right with God in Christ. No wonder Matt Redman wrote; *"Your blood speaks a better word than all the empty claims I heard upon this earth..."*

All I can do this morning is bring you again to the window of God's amazing grace & say look out over what God has done for you in Christ, here are things you can further explore... However you have to get your gospel boots on & go out into the vast landscape of Scripture with the Holy Spirit as your revealer-guide & discover the beauty & depth of all these Christ exalting, Satan silencing, sin defeating & hope giving truths for yourself. May my preaching & may our lives be a window through which others can see the amazing grace of God & may we allow nothing to obscure the view.