

## **Introduction**

I'd like to begin by asking you two questions. First, how many of you have heard a lot about the love of God over the last ten years? Almost all of you have. Second, how many of you have heard a lot about the wrath of God over the last ten years? That's a curious thing because God's wrath is just as real as His love is. And that's what I'm going to preach about today. I hope and pray that doing so will prepare our minds and hearts for this Easter week that's now upon us.

## **God Is Wrath**

Look first of all at the word that's used in Job 42:7; Psalm 38:1; and Revelation 19:15, "**wrath.**" "Wrath" is an old English word that one dictionary defines this way, "**deep, intense anger and indignation.**" That's a good definition and notice what those verses teach us. God is wrath in the same kind of way that He is love.

Now, it is true that most professing Christians believe that. But it's also true that the words, "**God is love**" are heard far more frequently in the church today than the words, "**God is wrath.**" When was the last time you heard a preacher in person or on television speak about it? When was the last time you read an article or devotional about it? Or when was the last time you heard Christians converse about it? My point is that God's wrath is a forbidden subject today – not only in the culture but in the church as well. Christians either down play it or ignore it altogether. They think and talk very little, if at all, about it.

But it's different in the Bible! The fact is that the Old and New Testaments, in one way or another, refer to it over 600 times. As A.W. Pink says it in his book *The Attributes of God*, "**A study of the concordance will show that there are more references in Scripture to the anger, fury, and wrath of God, than there are to His love and tenderness.**" That surprises, even shocks, most people but it's true.

God's wrath is a reality and we need to talk about it, no matter how taboo doing that is. So let's talk about it. Let's descend into its particulars.

### **God's Wrath Defined**

One of the reasons that people down play or ignore God's wrath is because they think that it's unworthy of Him. He is the most loving, generous, wonderful, and appealing being in the universe. And anger, they think, is inconsistent with that. They think that because they perceive divine anger in terms of human anger. You've all seen the bumper sticker that says, "*I don't get mad; I get even.*" Another takes it a step further and says, "*I get mad and even.*" Many people equate God's anger with that. They see in it the same hostility and pride that they see in human anger, which are in fact unworthy of Him.

Another reason that people down play or ignore God's wrath is because they think that it's cruel. They usually equate it with hell and regard it as a vindictive overreaction to people's sins. I had a criminal client years ago who shattered a man's nose with a beer bottle for only slightly insulting him. Many people view God's wrath as being like that, a cruel overreaction to the insult of sins.

But that isn't what it is. It is instead the settled opposition of His holiness to sin. In terms of moral character, He is perfectly and utterly pure. Because He is, He always reacts and responds adversely to sin. The Bible calls that adverse reaction and response His "wrath."

We experience this to a degree ourselves. A man was starving his dog. His neighbor reacted inwardly when she found out. She was disgusted and appalled. She also responded outwardly. She called the police to have him arrested because he deserved it.

That reaction and response of ours is a pale reflection of God's moral purity. That moral purity compels Him to react adversely to sin. He is disgusted or appalled. It also compels Him to respond adversely to sin. He acts against what disgusts or appalls Him. The

Bible calls that reaction and response His wrath.

God's wrath is always just. His reaction isn't too much or too little. He never over or under reacts. His response isn't too harsh or too lenient. He never over or under responds. His reaction and response are always commensurate with the nature of the sin that is committed. His wrath is just.

But it's terrifying as well. That how the author of Hebrews says it in 10:31 of his book, **"It's a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God."** I know those are unpleasant words and we don't like hearing them but they're true. God always reacts and responds adversely to sin and it's a terrifying thing when He does.

We see why it is in Romans 11:22. In that verse, Paul reveals what God's wrath coming against us does. It **"cuts us off."** It cuts us off from Him and His kingdom and thus, from the foundational conditions of abundant life - true love, peace, and joy. That separation is partial in nature and depth in this life but total in the life to come. Jesus described it this way in Matthew 10:28. God is **"able to destroy both soul and body in hell."**

Listen to four comments that people I've counseled have made. **"I feel so alone."** **Nothing moves me."** **"I can never remember feeling calm."** And **"I can't remember the last time I was happy."** Those comments represent the dynamics of hell, on earth, except that they are dramatically deeper and more pervasive in hell. They do help us understand, by way of analogy, what God's wrath does. It cuts us off from the One whom we're psychologically and spiritually suited to be loved by and to love. The result is loss of love, peace, and joy. That loss is partial in earthly life now but total in the eternal life to come.

You can see then why the Bible says what it does. God's wrath is **"a terrifying thing."**

### **Jesus Is the Propitiation**

Consequently, it needs to be turned away from us and Jesus did just

that. Notice a common word in four of the verses we read: Romans 3:25; 1 John 2:2; 4:10; and Hebrews 2:17. That word is **“propitiation.”** Propitiation is one of the Bible’s cardinal tenets. It connotes a remarkable reality - the pacifying of God’s wrath by an offering.

What the Bible teaches about that, in a nutshell, is this. God is utterly and perfectly just. Because He is, His wrath must come against our sins. If it didn’t, He wouldn’t be just. His wrath, therefore, must be pacified. But there’s only one way that it can be. There must be an offering to Him that satisfies all of the demands of His justice. And there is. That offering is Him.

That is how Biblical religion differs from pagan religion. In pagan religion, people pacify the wrath of their many temperamental gods by giving them offerings. The rule in that regard is the bigger the offering the better. The biggest offering of all of course is a person’s life, which explains the practice of human sacrifice. You can see that propitiation, pacifying divine wrath by an offering, is part of both pagan and Biblical religion. But the difference is this. In paganism, propitiation is the work of man. His action pacifies the wrath of the gods. But in the Bible, propitiation is the work of God Himself. His action pacifies His wrath.

The Bible makes clear what that action of His was. God the Son, Jesus, died on the cross for our sins. He took into Himself all of our sins and paid the penalty for them that we should have paid. That penalty was that Father God’s wrath came against Him. Father God cut Him off completely from Himself and His goodness. Jesus, as a result, was totally devoid of what had been His very essence - love, peace, and joy.

Think of those four comments I mentioned earlier and the experiences they represent. Then make those experiences total and complete in nature and depth, like they are in hell. That’s part of what Jesus experienced on the cross. It’s what compelled Him to cry out, **“My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me.”** A man once told me about his life with his wife, **“It’s hell on earth.”** We hear that comment a lot don’t we – people in bad circumstances contending that they’re going

through hell on earth. But they aren't. The truth is that there's only one person in history who literally went through hell on earth. It was Jesus, on the cross.

That's what He did and 1 John 4:10 reveals the result. He was **"the propitiation for our sins."** Note the word "propitiation." It communicates that our sins have already been punished. God pacified His wrath by offering Himself. He turned it away from us by turning it on to Jesus.

## **Fear God**

That is a message of Easter and it's profound. It's so profound in fact that it demands a response from us. We must fear God.

All of us know by experience what fear is. It's nothing more than the anticipation of harm. To fear is to anticipate that something painful or detrimental might happen to us. Think for a moment about some of the things that we fear: drunk drivers, pit bulls, inflation, electricity, police, cancer, tornadoes, parents, walking down Hillman Street at night, or maybe even German 201. Someone wrote on the wall of a Clemson University dormitory, **"Where will you spend eternity?"** Someone else later scrawled underneath it, **"The way things look now, in German 201."** That illustrates what fear is. It's the anticipation of harm.

Now, it's smart to fear some things. I talked with a man who lives in Arizona. He told me he never puts on a pair of shoes without looking inside them first. If he doesn't, he said, he might stick his foot into a scorpion and get stung. It's smart to fear scorpions. We discern they can harm us and act accordingly so they don't.

But it's even smarter to fear God. Going back to Matthew 10:28 again, Jesus said, **"Do not fear those who kill the body but fear Him (God) who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell."** Fearing God is the beginning of smartness. Don't misunderstand me. He isn't mean. On the contrary, He's utterly and perfectly good. But He is dangerous. It's precisely His goodness in fact that makes Him dangerous.

Suppose that woman didn't care her neighbor was starving his dog and did nothing. Or even worse, suppose she didn't care he was starving his child and did nothing. She wouldn't be good. It's precisely her goodness that gave rise to her wrath. It's the same with God. It's His goodness that gives rise to His wrath and make Him dangerous. He is the most dangerous reality in the universe. We're smart, therefore, if we fear Him.

To fear Him means to discern He can harm us and to act to avoid that harm. So, act to avoid that harm! How? Jesus tells us in the verses after Matthew 10:28. It's by apprenticing ourselves to Him.

I'd explain it in these terms. There are three possibilities when it comes to Jesus. First, to some people, He is nothing. They don't take Him into account at all in their thinking and living. Second, to some people He is something. They are what Oswald Chambers called "**the half-converted, the average Christian.**" They take Jesus into account in their thinking and living in those parts of their lives where they think they need Him – but not at all in those parts where they think they don't. And finally, third, to some people, He is everything. Some people take Him into account in all things. Chambers defined that this way: "**You must yield yourself totally to Christ, remain in Him, and obey His commands.**" Or as I just said it, we apprentice ourselves to Him. We make the decision to be with Him in order to learn and do all that He says. We then arrange our affairs around carrying out that decision.

Of those three possibilities, only the third is a sure thing. So make Jesus everything. You'll never experience God's wrath if you do.

## **Conclusion**

I'd sum up in closing what God's wrath implies to us with a few lines of verse written by Frederick Faber: "**O how I fear Thee, living God! – With deepest, tenderest fears, - And worship Thee with trembling hope, - And penitential fears.**" God's wrath is just as real as His love is. So act to avoid it. Apprentice yourself to Jesus.