

Introduction

Several years ago, a man explained to me how bad his work environment was with these words, "**It's hell on earth.**" We hear that comment a lot don't we. People in bad circumstances tell us that they're going through hell on earth. But they aren't. The fact is that there's only one person in history who literally went through hell on earth. That person was Jesus on the cross. The text I just read explains that.

The Wrath of God

It does so in the word "propitiation" in verse 2.

To understand that word and what Jesus did on the cross, we have to first of all understand the wrath of God. "Wrath" is an old English word that means "**deep, intense anger and indignation,**" which is exactly what God has. You're not surprised to hear that I'm sure. You, like most professing Christians do, believe in the wrath of God.

But most also either down play or disregard it. Not long ago, Larry King asked one of America's most recognized televangelists what he believes about God's wrath. He refused to tell him though and explained why. God has given him a positive ministry that encourages and inspires people, not scares them. So he doesn't talk about things like that.

Christians may downplay or disregard God's wrath but the Bible doesn't. The Old and New Testaments combined refer to it over 600 times? There are more references to it in fact than there are to His love. We need to think and talk about it, therefore, especially tonight. I say "especially tonight" because we can't understand what Jesus did on the cross unless we do. So let's think and talk about it.

God's Wrath Defined

I start by defining what it is.

One of the reasons Christians downplay or disregard God's wrath is

because they think it's unworthy of Him. He utterly lovely and loving and anger, they think, is inconsistent with that. They think that because they perceive divine anger in terms of human anger. They see in it the same hostility and pride they see in human anger, which are unworthy of Him.

But they're wrong in doing so. God's wrath isn't hostility and pride. It's instead the settled opposition of His holiness to sin. He's perfectly and completely holy or moral. Because He is, He always reacts and responds adversely to sin. The Bible calls that adverse reaction and response His "wrath."

We experience that to a degree ourselves. Suppose we see someone purposely kick a sleeping baby. We'd react inwardly. We'd be appalled. We'd also respond outwardly. We'd call the police to have him arrested because he deserves it.

That adverse reaction and response of ours is a pale reflection of God's moral perfection. That moral perfection causes Him to react adversely to sin. He's disgusted or appalled. It also causes Him to respond adversely to sin. He acts against what disgusts or appalls Him. The Bible calls that adverse reaction and response His wrath.

Listen to what Hebrews 10:31 says in that regard, "**It's a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.**" That refers specifically to the Second Coming of Jesus. Unsaved sinners will be resurrected, stand before God in judgment, and be found guilty. His wrath will then come fully against them. He will respond by cutting them off. That's how Paul says it in Romans 11:22. He will cut them off.

That means He'll separate them completely from Him and His goodness. They will never again, as a result, experience love, peace, and joy. They'll only experience despair, frustration, and shame instead - forever. That is "hell."

A good way to understand the dynamics of hell is by way of analogy. That analogy is psychological illness. A bi-polar person once told me "I feel so alone." A clinically depressed person once told me, "Nothing moves me." And an obsessive-compulsive person once told me, "I can

never remember feeling calm." Those illnesses, together and at once, are a microcosm of people's normal condition in hell. I say microcosm because their condition in hell will be far deeper and more pervasive than that. Their condition will be like that, in other words, but far worse.

You can see then why the Bible says what it does. God's wrath is a terrifying thing that needs to be pacified or turned away.

Propitiation

But "**How can it be?**" That's the critical question. The answer is "**by an offering.**" The Bible uses a word for that, the one we see here in verse 2, "**Propitiation.**" Propitiation is one of the Bible's cardinal tenets. It connotes the pacifying of God's wrath by an offering.

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

That's 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 of all of course is a person's life, which explains the practice of human sacrifice.

But notice what verse 2 says in contrast. Jesus Himself "**is the propitiation for our sins.**" That's the difference. In paganism, propitiation is the work of man. His action, his offering, pacifies the wrath of his gods. But in the Bible, propitiation is the work of God Himself. His action, His offering, pacifies His wrath.

Most of you, if not all, know what that action is. God the Son, Jesus, became our substitute on the cross. He took into Himself all of our sins and everyone else's, including Hitler's. He was therefore, for six hours on the cross, the most evil person who ever lived. Father God, as

a result, reacted adversely. He was appalled by Him, even more so than He was by Hitler. Father God also responded adversely. He cut Jesus off completely from Him and His goodness. Take the bi-polar's sense of loneliness, the depressive's sense of lifelessness, and the obsessive compulsive's sense of strife - and multiply that by a thousand. You then have an inkling of what Jesus, in addition to the physical pain, suffered on the cross. It was literally hell on earth. It was Father God's wrath coming fully against Him - exactly as it will come against unsaved sinners. He experienced exactly what they will experience on the Day of Judgment and in hell.

That's what Jesus did and the word "**propitiation**" in verse 2 reveals the result. Father God's wheel of justice and retribution has already been turned. His wrath that should have come against us came against Jesus instead, turning it away from us. He experienced hell, in other words, so that we wouldn't have to.

Our Response

So that's what the word "propitiation" means. God pacified His own wrath by offering Himself. That is one of the most remarkable of all realities and demands a response from us. We should do two things.

First, we should fear God. Fearing God doesn't mean reverencing and respecting Him, although we should do that. It means instead what we normally mean when we say that we fear something, like tornadoes. Tornadoes aren't mean but they are dangerous. We anticipate that they can harm us and act so that they won't. We're wise if we do. It's the same with God. He isn't mean, but He is, in His wrath, dangerous. We anticipate that He can harm us and act so that He won't. That, the Bible says, is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom.

Second, we should make and carry out the decision to follow Jesus. That's how we act so that God won't harm us. There's something we need to grasp in that regard. We don't avoid hell and get into heaven "by the skin of our teeth." We avoid hell and get into heaven by making

and carrying out a decision – to follow Jesus. We arrange all of our affairs around being with Him and learning and doing what He says. If we do that, God's wrath will not come against us. If we don't, it will. It's as simple as that.

Conclusion

That then is what Jesus did on the cross. When I was growing up, preachers talked all the time about there being "a hell to shun." It's normal, in terms of self-interest, to shun hell. But Jesus didn't. He embraced it – on the cross. He voluntarily suffered the full wrath of God on it so that we wouldn't have to. He "went through hell" for us. Let's honor that by getting into heaven for Him. Decide to follow Him!