

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 years? Almost all of you. Second, how many of you have heard a lot about the wrath of God? Almost none of you. That's a curious thing isn't it because the wrath of God is just as real as the love of God and that's what I'm going to preach about today – the wrath of God. I hope doing so will help prepare all of our minds and hearts for the Easter season that's almost on us.

GOD HAS WRATH

"Wrath" is an old English word that one dictionary defines as, *"deep, intense anger and indignation."* Those two synonyms, anger and indignation, give us some idea of what wrath is and the reason I mention it is because Paul does in Romans 5:9. Notice the phrase there, "the wrath of God." That phrase teaches that God has wrath.

Now, most professing Christians believe that. But they also either down play it or ignore it altogether.

I heard Larry King interview one of America's most recognized pastors and televangelists. During the interview, Larry asked him what he believes about God's wrath. He wouldn't answer the question though. God has given him a positive ministry that encourages and inspires people, he said. So he doesn't talk about things like that.

When was the last time that you heard a speaker at a conference or event even mention God's wrath? When was the last time that you heard a preacher or teacher talk about it on radio or TV? When was the last time that you read about it in a magazine article or devotional guide? When was the last time that you heard Christians converse about it?

You can see that God's wrath is a taboo subject not only in our culture but the church as well. Christians either down play it or ignore it altogether. They don't think and talk very much about it.

But the Bible does! Did you know that the Old and New Testaments

combined refer to it over 600 times. In his book The Attributes of God, A.W. Pink says this in fact, *"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 unpopular doing that is. So let's talk about it.

GOD'S WRATH DEFINED

I start by defining what it is.

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 attractive being in the universe. And anger, people 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 view God's anger as being 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 that, a cruel overreaction to the insult of sins.

But that isn't what God's wrath is about. What it is about is the settled opposition of His holiness to sin. God is perfectly and wholly moral. 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. Suppose that someone kicks a sleeping baby. You would react inwardly. You would be appalled. You would also respond outwardly. You'd call the police to have him

arrested because he deserves it.

That 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 is disgusted or appalled. It also causes 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 sins that are committed. His wrath is just.

But it's terrifying as well. That how the author of Hebrews says it. In 10:31, he writes, *"It's a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God."* I know those aren't pleasant 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 His goodness and thus separates us from true love, peace, and joy. That separation is partial in this life but total in the life to come.

The loss of a beloved spouse is an imperfect but helpful analogy. My mother was a widow for 40 years. Two years before she died, she shared a poignant insight with me that I'll never forget. She said that she still missed my father. She described it as a strong sense of loss inside. She felt it, she explained, even when her children and grandchildren surrounded her. She was cut off from her beloved husband and still felt the loss 38 years later.

That helps us understand what the wrath of God does. It cuts us off from the One whom we were made, psychologically and spiritually, to love and be loved by. The consequence is a deep sense of loss that hurts. This loss is partial now in our earthly life. It is like my mother's in extent and degree. This loss is total in our eternal life to come. It is

like my mother's in extent and degree times one million.

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.

PACIFYING GOD'S WRATH BY AN OFFERING

The question is "how can it be?" The answer, according to the Bible, is "by an offering." The Bible uses a word for that, "propitiation." Romans 3:25; Hebrews 2:17; 1 John 2:2; and the verse I read today, 1 John 4:10 all use that word. Propitiation is one of the Bible's cardinal tenets. What it connotes is 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. Consequently, His wrath must come against our sins. If it didn't, He wouldn't be just. His wrath, therefore, must be pacified. 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 God Himself.

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 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. 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.

Romans 5 explains what that action is. Notice these phrases: verse 6 – *"Christ died for the ungodly"*; verse 8 – *"Christ died for us"*; and verse 10 – *"through the death of His Son"*. Most of you know what that's all about. 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 goodness. He totally

deprived Him of His very essence - love, peace, and joy. Take my mother's sense of loss and multiply it by a billion. That's part of what Jesus experienced on the cross and why He cried out, *"My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me."* The cross experience of Jesus was literally hell on earth for Him. Father God's wrath that should have come against us came against Him instead.

That's what Jesus did and Romans 5:9 reveals the result, *"We are saved from the wrath of God."* 1 John 4:10 teaches the same thing. It says that *"God sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."* Note the word "propitiation." Do you realize what those two verses together mean? They mean that our sins have already been punished. God's wheel of justice and retribution has already been turned. His wrath has already come against us. All of this was in and through Jesus.

WHAT PROPITIATION MEANS TO US

So that's what the word "propitiation" in the Bible means. God pacified His own wrath by offering Himself. That is a solemn reality that means four things, as a practical matter, to us.

First, we must accept Jesus as Savior and Lord. We must make and carry out the decision to be with and like Him. If we do, God's wrath will not come against us. If we don't, it will. It's as simple as that.

Second, we must detest sin just like God does. Our culture has trivialized sin. I think of actress Kirstie Ally's comment about the seven deadly sins, for instance. *"I think some idiot made them up,"* she said. Our culture takes sin very lightly and if we let it influence us, we will too. So, don't let it influence us. Let's recognize sin as sin and refuse to participate in it. We should detest it like God does.

Take the news coverage of the Anna Nicole Smith story, for example. This coverage isn't news. It's gossip. It's character assassination. It's newscasters saying bad things about people in order to entertain other people. So many eagerly participate in this. But you and I as followers of Jesus shouldn't. It appalls God and should us as well.

Third, we must fear God. Fearing God doesn't mean reverencing and respecting Him. It means instead what we normally mean when we say that we fear something. We fear tornadoes for instance. They aren't mean but they are dangerous. We anticipate that they can harm us and act so that they won't. It's the same way with God. He isn't mean but as we've seen today, He and His wrath are dangerous. We anticipate that He can harm us and act so that He won't. Fearing God this way, as the Bible says, is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom.

Fourth and finally, we must love God. Notice what John tells us in 1 John 4:10, *"In this is love, that God loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."*

Suppose that one of my sons has to experience God's wrath exactly like Jesus did, cross and all, to save your life. Also suppose that both he and I have to willingly agree that he will and we do. We do agree and he goes through what Jesus did for you. If you're a functional person, you'd understand the love that it took for us to do that and you'd love us in return. What an ingrate you'd be if you didn't.

It's the same way with God and us. We should love Him because of what He did for us. So, let's love Him or at least try to. There isn't anything vague or abstract about what that means. It means that we do two specific things, both of which I explained in detail in our *First Things First Campaign* in January. First, we make our chief aim in life to love Him with our whole being. And second, we pursue that aim by understanding and knowing Him. Considering everything I've said today, we're ingrates if we don't.

CONCLUSION

I'd sum up in closing what God's wrath means 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 let's act accordingly.