

www.ShepherdServe.org

You are welcome to distribute printed copies of this document, or copy and paste this document to distribute via email, as long as the document is unaltered and kept in its *entirety* (including copyright notices), and is not sold for profit. However, if you wish to post this material on your website or anywhere else online, you must first contact us to get permission. ©2007 by David Servant

Christ's Incredible Cross

By David Servant

EIGHT The Cross Preeminent

It's a fact: The cross of Jesus Christ and the topics directly related to it dominate the epistles of the New Testament. George Smeaton, observing this fact in the writings of the apostles and church leaders to the early Christians, notes how often they refer to Christ's atoning death:

The numerous explanations they [the epistles] contain as to the Lord's atoning death, suffice to prove that there is not a spiritual blessing which does not stand in immediate or mediate connection with it, not a duty which is not enforced by it as a motive. How wide the influence of this great article is on doctrine and practice, at once appears from the place which it occupies in the epistles. The entire range of Scripture truth takes a tincture from it, and its influence is felt even where it may not be expressly named.¹

Of the 2,767 sentences in the epistles,² we find that ninety contain a direct reference to Christ's death, crucifixion, blood, or cross. That amounts to one out of every thirty-one sentences.³

If we then add to our list other uncounted sentences that speak of "the gospel" (which is "the word of the cross"⁴) and those mentioning Jesus as "the Lamb" (an obvious

¹George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Atonement According to the Apostles*, p. 100.

²This is based upon the *New American Standard* version.

³See Rom. 1:4; 3:25; 4:4; 5:6, 8, 9, 10; 6:3, 4, 5-6, 8-9, 10; 7:4; 8:11, 34; 10:7, 9; 14:9, 15; 1 Cor. 1:17, 18, 23; 2:2, 8; 8:11; 10:16; 11:25, 26, 27; 15:3, 20; 2 Cor. 4:10; 5:14-15; 13:4; Gal. 1:1; 2:20, 21; 3:1; 5:11; 6:12, 14; Eph. 1:7, 20; 2:13, 16; Phil. 2:8; 3:10; Col. 1:18, 20, 22; 2:12, 14, 20; 1 Thes. 1:10; 2:15; 4:14; 5:10; 2 Tim. 2:8, 11; Heb. 2:9, 14; 5:7; 6:6; 9:12, 14, 15; 10:19, 29; 12:2, 24; 13:12, 20; 1 Pet. 1:2, 3, 19, 21; 2:24; 3:18; 1 John 1:7; 5:6, 8; Rev. 1:5, 5, 18; 2:8; 5:9; 7:14; 11:8; 12:11; 19:13.

reference to His sacrificial death on the cross), then *one out of every sixteen sentences* makes reference to Christ's death on the cross.⁵

Finally, if we add further uncounted sentences that make some direct reference to Jesus' death in words other than those mentioned above—in such phrases as “He offered Himself,” “laid down His life,” “gave Himself,” or “sacrifice of Himself,” and so on—then *one out of every thirteen sentences in the epistles makes some reference to Jesus' death on the cross.*⁶

It would be well for those of us who preach God's Word to compare our preaching and teaching with that of the apostles. How many of us could claim that in our sermons one out of every thirteen sentences refers in some way to Jesus' death on the cross?

The Central Theme

Beyond this, as Smeaton observed, there is hardly a topic contained in the epistles that is not in some way connected to the doctrine of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross. How would it be possible to preach properly on the subjects of righteousness, justification, reconciliation, sanctification, redemption, forgiveness, sonship, faith, sin, peace with God, the new birth, our future resurrection, the Lord's Supper, baptism, future judgment, heaven, hell, the rapture of the church, the new covenant, God's grace, love, mercy, justice, holiness, in-Christ realities, Christ's ministry as our High Priest and Advocate, victory over sin, or Satan's defeat, without mention of Jesus' death on the cross?

Furthermore, how could we properly teach about such subjects as the love of the brethren, our obligation to forgive others, marriage, humility, or enduring hardship and persecution, without relating them, as did the apostles, to Jesus' great example on the cross?⁷

In light of the above facts, it is certainly an indictment upon our preaching when we feel we must make a choice between *either* evangelistic preaching *or* feeding the Christians on Sunday mornings. There are very few topics contained in the New

⁴Today, “the gospel” is a loosely-used term in many circles, unfortunately used to label any kind of positive preaching. But the phrase “the gospel” in the New Testament refers strictly to the message of Christ's atoning death on the cross, His burial, and His resurrection; see 1 Cor. 15:1-5.

⁵See Rom. 1:4, 9, 15, 16; 2:16; 11:28; 15:16, 19, 20; 16:25; 1 Cor. 4:15; 9:12, 14, 16, 18, 23; 15:1; 2 Cor. 2:12; 4:3; 8:18; 9:13; 10:14; 11:4, 7; Gal. 1:6, 8, 9, 11; 2:2, 5, 7, 14; 3:8; 4:13; Eph. 1:13; 3:6; 6:15, 19; Phil. 1:5, 12, 16, 27; 2:22; 4:3, 15; Col. 1:5; 1 Th. 1:5; 2:4, 8, 9; 3:2; 2 Th. 1:8; 2:14; 1 Tim. 1:11; 2 Tim. 1:8; Plm. 13; 1 Pet. 1:12; 4:6, 7; Rev. 5:6, 8, 12, 13; 6:1, 9, 10, 17; 13:8; 14:1, 4, 4, 6; 15:3; 17:14; 19:7, 9; 21:9, 14, 22, 23, 27; 22:1, 3

⁶Christ as an offering: Rom. 8:3; Eph. 5:2; Heb. 7:27; 9:25, 28; 10:10, 12, 14; as delivered up for us: Rom. 4:25; 8:32; as suffering for us: Rom. 8:17; 2 Cor. 1:5; Heb. 2:10, 18; 5:8; 9:26; 1 Pet. 1:11; 4:1, 13; 5:1; as a propitiation for our sins: Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10; as purchasing us: 1 Cor. 6:20; 2 Pet. 2:1; as a sacrifice: 1 Cor. 5:7; as having His body broken for us: 1 Cor. 11:24; as becoming sin for us: 2 Cor. 5:21; as becoming a curse for us: Gal. 3:13; as coming to save sinners: 1 Tim. 1:15; as ransoming us: 1 Tim. 2:6; as giving Himself: Gal. 1:4; Eph. 5:25; Tit. 2:14; as taking away sins: 1 John 3:5; as laying down His life: 1 John 3:16; as sent to be the Savior: 1 John 4:14; as pierced for us; Rev. 1:7; as making purification for our sins: Heb. 1:3.

⁷Christ's death as our example in loving the brethren: Rom. 14:15; 15:1-3; 1 John 4:10-11; in forgiving others: Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:12-13; Matt. 18:21-35; in marriage: Eph. 5:22-33; in humility: Phil. 2:5-8; in enduring hardship and persecution: Heb. 12:3; 1 Pet. 2:21-23.

Testament epistles that are not built upon the foundation of Christ's sacrificial death; thus, it should always be an easy matter to naturally blend the "word of the cross" into our sermons.

If a preacher is finding it hard to include Jesus' vicarious death naturally into his sermons, he ought to re-examine what he is preaching. Quite possibly, either he is teaching something that none of the apostles would be caught teaching, or he is presenting something in a way that the apostles would never have presented it.

Keeping Our Message Balanced

Modern American Christianity offers, through its many teachers and counselors, unlimited seminars on numerous topics. While many of these teachings are related to the Bible, I have found they are often mixed with a dose of psychology and human conjecture.

Presently it seems that marriage seminars are in vogue. I thank God for the marriages that have been helped and healed by this means, but can you imagine the apostle Paul (or any of the apostles) visiting a local church to host a four-day marriage seminar? Can you imagine the listing of his sermon topics, such as "How to Understand Your Mate," and "How to Handle Disputes About Finances," and "How to Meet the Psychological Needs of Your Wife"?

For those who know the New Testament, the thought of such a scene is laughable. Of course, we know that Paul certainly did instruct his converts concerning marriage, and his counsel was short, to the point, and profound. He told husbands to love their wives just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, and he told wives to submit to their husbands as the church is subject to Christ.

Paul's instructions are only understandable to those who understand the cross. Following the inspiration and example of the cross, those who believe in the message of the cross have God-glorifying marriages. If Christian husbands and wives would obey Paul's simple instructions, their marital problems would end.

Is it possible that the fundamental reason why marriage seminars are so necessary in the church today is because so few Christians have a true revelation of the cross of Jesus Christ? Once the cross has truly captured one's heart, he sees and treats others differently, including his mate. That man or woman you are married to is one for whom Christ died.

Of course, I'm not saying that we should no longer teach about Christian marriage. I am saying, however, that all our teaching should be Christ-centered and, thus, cross-centered. Those of us who call ourselves ministers would be wise to follow Paul's admonition to Timothy: "Preach the word" (2 Tim 4:2). If we do, God will anoint our preaching. If we don't, our preaching won't be anointed. It may be entertaining, it may be enlightening, it may even be somewhat helpful, but it won't be anointed.

I could go much further with an analysis of many modern trends in the church, but I'm afraid that perhaps the wrath of a sizeable portion of evangelical Christianity would fall upon me. May I say, however, with as much restraint as possible, that those of us who teach and instruct others in Christ's body need to ask ourselves, "Where in Scripture can I find an apostolic precedent for what I preach and teach?" When the teaching in the church becomes nothing more than a series of self-help and success-motivation seminars sanctified by a few out-of-context scriptures, something is definitely wrong.

Have you ever wondered why the early Christians displayed such a high level of commitment when compared to modern believers? Peter, James, and John did not have the book of Acts to preach from in order to motivate their flock to act like the people of the book of Acts (as we often try to do).

They had a simple message of one who died for our sins, which effected a change in those who believed it. They were truly born-again—not just "converted," not just "Christian hobbyists." That message motivated people to truly repent of their sins and

obediently live for the one who died for them. That message was not man-centered but cross-centered and Christ-centered.

Are we emphasizing what the New Testament emphasizes? Is our message as balanced as the New Testament?

Why Preach the Cross?

Although examining every reference to Christ's atoning death in the epistles would be profitable, it would require a lengthy commentary far beyond the scope of this book. Just a preliminary study of primary references would necessitate a perusal of 212 verses (listed in footnotes number 51, 53 and 54*) and would not include the numerous indirect and related references to the cross. Therefore, our study will be limited to a few passages from the writings of the apostle Paul.

In this chapter, we will examine specific passages in 1 Corinthians, Galatians, and finally Romans. In particular, we will be investigating the centrality of the cross in Paul's preaching and examine his explanation of how Christ's death saves us. In subsequent chapters, we will examine scriptures that concern themselves with the accomplishments and implications of the cross.

No other epistle so clearly discloses the centrality of the cross as does Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Although I've previously mentioned the following verses, they are worthy of a second examination:

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, that the *cross of Christ* should not be made void. For the *word of the cross* is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:17-18, emphasis added).

Quite obviously, according to Paul's statement, "the gospel" and "the word of the cross" are synonymous terms. Paul told us that "the word of the cross" is *the power of God* to us who are being saved. He used the identical expression in His letter to the Romans, calling "the gospel" *the power of God* for salvation (Rom. 1:16). The gospel is "the word of the cross." If the cross has not been mentioned, the gospel has not been preached.

Because the word of the cross is the power of God, Paul told us that he was careful to let nothing diminish its simple message; thus he resisted the temptation to use "cleverness of speech," lest the "cross of Christ should be made void."

How we need to recapture his viewpoint today. Too often, the cross of Christ is voided by our pathetic attempts to make the gospel more appetizing to the world. Not convinced that the cross can be left to stand as it is, we obscure it behind the dust-clouds of human reasoning. Or we attempt to smooth its roughness through our eloquent sermons and clever methods of evangelism, while, in reality, we insult it. Once smoothed, we may refinish it, trying to make it "relevant" by presenting the cross as a panacea for psychological ills or a way to the good life. In every case, the cross is being voided.

No Compromise

Just a few verses later, Paul again affirmed that the cross was central to his message:

For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; *but we preach Christ crucified*, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness....And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For *I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified*. (1 Cor. 1:22-23; 2:1-2, emphasis added).

Although Paul was careful to avoid offending his audiences because of cultural peculiarities, he never compromised his message for the sake of gaining more converts. We must see that the gospel does not need to be made relevant—*it already is relevant*—because it provides the answer to humanity’s greatest need: the forgiveness of sins.

Some have reasoned, “So many people want to get rich, so let’s tell them that if they accept Jesus, God will prosper them financially. That will attract them.”

Rather than telling the unsaved that greed is one of the sins that will send them to hell, some preachers actually fuel their listeners’ greed by means of a “gospel”! The biblical gospel calls people to repent of greed (as well as other sins) because they cannot serve God and money, as Jesus told us.

Later in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul’s gospel is unveiled further. He did not preach just the historical fact of Christ’s death but also its significance. He preached that Christ died for our sins:

Now I make known to you, brethren, *the gospel which I preached* to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold fast the word I preached to you....For I delivered to you as of *first importance* what I also received, *that Christ died for our sins* according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve (1 Cor. 15:1-5, emphasis added).

When Paul first preached the gospel to the Corinthians, he told them that Jesus had died as their substitute, suffering God’s wrath for their sins according to the Old Testament predictions. No doubt the 53rd chapter of Isaiah was a well-used text.

The Authentic Gospel

Paul did not reserve these truths solely for Corinthian ears—it was his consistent message. He wrote to the Galatians:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son God, who loved me and delivered Himself up for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died needlessly. You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? (Gal. 2:20 - 3:1, emphasis added).

Paul’s preaching of the gospel was so cross-centered that he could describe it as a public portrayal of Christ’s crucifixion. Jesus was portrayed as one who “delivered Himself up for” us, and thus satisfied the claims of God’s righteousness. We have been crucified with Him since He was our substitute. Through His sacrifice, the gift of righteousness is offered to all. That is the good news.

In the book of Romans, we find the clearest exposition of the gospel offered in the epistles. In the lengthy introduction of the first chapter, where Paul used the words *the gospel* four times, he prepared his readers for an explanation of how Christ’s death saves us. His explanation in the chapters that follow establishes a standard by which all gospel preaching should be measured. The mark of the authentic gospel, as Paul stated in his introduction, is that it reveals “the righteousness of God”:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it *the*

righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “But the righteous man shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:16-17, emphasis added).

How is God’s righteousness revealed in the gospel? Paul began to explain in his very next sentence:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18).

Two fundamental concepts are introduced in this sentence: humanity’s unrighteousness and God’s wrath against humanity’s unrighteousness. These two truths are axioms upon which the gospel is built. Without them, Christ’s death is meaningless.

Because God is righteous and all people are unrighteous, all people deserve God’s wrath. If God, the moral Judge of the universe, did not inflict wrath upon unrighteousness, then He Himself would be unrighteous. He *must* punish the guilty.

How could a loving God offer sinful humanity forgiveness—when they deserved nothing other than His wrath—and at the same time maintain His righteousness? It was, as Martin Luther described it, “a problem worthy of God,” and one that was solved by Jesus’ death.

The authentic gospel reveals God’s righteousness. God is shown *righteously* offering all people forgiveness because His wrath was poured out upon Jesus. God did not compromise His righteousness; our sins were punished in Christ, and because of it, God’s righteousness can be imputed to us.

The authentic gospel will always reveal God’s righteousness because it proclaims that Jesus died for our sins, suffering as our substitute. By His death, the gift of righteousness is freely offered to all who will believe. Using this criteria we can discern what is the true gospel and what is not. A gospel that does not reveal God’s righteousness is not the gospel.

For this reason, we should beware of any gospel that disregards or neglects the foundational axioms of humanity’s guilt and God’s wrath. Both truths have been attacked from various quarters, and it will do us well to take a moment and shore up these twin pillars of truth.

The Sinfulness of Humanity

One would think that humanity’s sinfulness is a self-evident fact against which none would argue. Yet it has been questioned, not only by those outside the church, but even by some within it. The very fact that some argue against it, however, only serves to undergird its veracity; only a proud sinner would dream that he is not a sinner.

Is humanity sinful? That question is best answered with a few other questions: Why is there a need for laws in every society? Why are there courts in session and a backlog of people waiting for trials? Why are the jails overcrowded? Why do the yellow pages contain such long listings of lawyers? Why do we need police? Why do we need an army? Why must we lock our doors?

Why must we purchase tickets for a baseball game rather than abide by an honor system? Why are business contracts necessary? Why must department stores hire detectives? Why do our employers withhold taxes from our paychecks? Why must we produce identification when we write out checks? Why do we have racial violence, a fifty-percent divorce rate, rampant use of illegal drugs, a billion-dollar pornography industry? All of these questions indict us as transgressors of God’s moral law.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul lays a foundation for the good news of Jesus’ sacrifice by repeatedly asserting humanity’s guilt before God. Here is a sample:

Being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful (Rom. 1:29-31).

Over the past few years, the contemporary self-esteem psychology has infiltrated the church, and we now hear some preachers telling us that man's greatest problem is that he doesn't love himself as he should. He is not a sinner—he just has a poor self-image. If he will open his heart to God, however, who truly loves him for what he is, then his damaged self-esteem can be repaired and he'll discover true fulfillment.

But this is not what the Bible teaches or the gospel reveals. God does love everyone, but God loves humans in spite of what they do. Unregenerate man has no real basis for possessing a good self-image. Man *feels* guilty because man *is* guilty. His conduct should shame him as his God-given conscience condemns him.

Only one who has believed in Jesus and been born again has any true basis for a good self-image. But his view of himself should rest solely on his worth through the cross by which he has been reconciled to God. There is no room for pride in the Christian. All his worth stems from God.

Guilty or Not Guilty?

Not only does Paul affirm humanity's sinfulness, but he also declares that every person knows he is guilty and is therefore without excuse. Guilt is an acquaintance universally known by the human race because God has given each person a conscience endorsing His moral law. Our conscience testifies that we will one day give account of ourselves before God:

For when the Gentiles who do not have the [Mosaic] Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Jesus Christ (Rom. 2:14-16).

Paul also contended that we all stand self-condemned because all of us have condemned others for doing what we ourselves have done:

Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. And do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment upon those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? (Rom. 2:1-3).

The sins we commit against others can all be placed under one category: selfishness. When we criticize others for their selfishness, we are openly testifying before the court of heaven that we know what is right and what is wrong. By our judgments of others, we condemn ourselves because we are just as guilty as those we condemn.

The greatest single affirmation of humanity's sinfulness is Jesus' death itself. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote:

The cross thus proclaims the holiness of God, the heinousness of sin, the terrible problem of sin, the terrible seriousness of man's rebellion against God."⁸

If humanity is not sinful, Jesus would not have needed to suffer on our behalf. The Scripture says He "bore our sins in His body on the cross" (1 Pet. 2:24) and was thus punished in our stead. This is why the doctrine of humanity's sinfulness is so vital to the gospel.

If humanity is not sinful, then Christ's death was meaningless for two reasons. First, if people are not sinful, they don't need to be saved; they need not fear God's wrath. Second, if people are not sinful, then our sins were not laid on Jesus because there were none to lay upon Him.

The true gospel cannot be preached without mention of humanity's sin because the gospel offers people forgiveness of sins. A.W. Tozer expressed this truth in his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*:

When the man's laboring conscience tells him that he...has from childhood been guilty of foul revolt against the Majesty in heavens, the inner pressure of self-accusation may become too heavy to bear. The gospel can lift this destroying burden from the mind...*But unless the weight of the burden is felt the gospel can mean nothing to the man* (italics mine).⁹

Does God Get Angry?

Even more undermined than humanity's sinfulness is the doctrine of God's wrath, which is equally foundational to the biblical gospel.

Some have looked at wrath as an attribute unbecoming of God, but their error has been in equating God's wrath with human wrath. God does not become angry as people do. As the apostle James wrote, "the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God" (Jas. 1:20). God's anger is always perfect in righteousness. We should never imagine Him as an impetuous dictator overcome by some fit of rage. J.I. Packer has said it well:

God's wrath in the Bible is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable, morally ignoble thing that human anger often is. It is, instead, a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil. God is only angry where anger is called for. Even among men, there is such a thing as *righteous* indignation, though it is, perhaps, rarely found. But all of God's indignation is righteous. Would a God who took as much pleasure in evil as He did good be a good God? Would a God who did not react adversely to evil in His world be morally perfect? Surely not.¹⁰

The typical shallow argument against God's wrath is that He is love, and "surely a loving God would never punish anyone." As Packer states, however, a morally perfect being cannot look on evil and good with the same response.

What would we think of a parent who, under the guise of love, never punished his son who repeatedly harms his other son? The parent's love demands that he love them equally, and thus he must treat them with fairness.

⁸ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Cross*, p. 159.

⁹ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, p. 11, italics mine.

¹⁰ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 136.

Love demands that wrongdoing be punished. Because God is perfect love, He acts with perfect justice, favoring no person above another. If He did not react against the selfish deeds of people, He would not be perfect in love. Therefore, if God is love, then He must also be wrathful.

God's wrath is hardly an obscure subject in the Bible. In fact, there are approximately 168 direct references where the word *wrath* is used in Scripture.

Is God's wrath only an Old Testament concept, as some have claimed? No, the New Testament comprises 23% of the Bible and claims 20% of the direct references to God's wrath.

If we add direct references to God's *anger*, *fury*, and *indignation*, our total climbs to at least 465 Bible references. And we still aren't taking into account the passages that convey God's anger and wrath without specifically calling it such, or the many references concerning future punishment and hell, many of which fell directly from the lips of Jesus. If God is not a God of wrath, then we should throw our Bibles out with the garbage.

Opening the Door to God's Wrath

One of the subtlest assaults on God's wrath is the idea swallowed by many charismatic Christians that "God doesn't punish anyone—they just open the door to the devil." The whole concept is designed to defend God's loving character, but it actually defames His character when compared to biblical revelation. It is comparable to the idea held by those liberal theologians who try to explain God's wrath as only the natural consequences for wrongdoing, consequences in which God is not personally involved.

Although it is certainly true that God may send His wrath upon the wicked by permitting Satan to afflict them,¹¹ God is still very much involved; Satan is only acting by His permission. God's wrath is not something that operates independently of His being; repeatedly He refers to it as "My wrath" and "My anger."¹²

If God is not involved in bringing wrath on wrongdoing and people are only "opening the door to Satan," then Satan has become God. If Satan is the sole punisher of wrongdoing, then God has become Satan, immoral and unjust.

The truth is that people open the door to God's wrath through sin. God's wrath may be discharged by permitting Satan to afflict wrongdoers, although it can come directly from God Himself (as the Bible so clearly indicates).¹³

Why is the doctrine of God's wrath so vital? If God is not a God of wrath, then, again, Christ's death is meaningless for two reasons.

First, if there is no such thing as God's wrath, then people have no reason to be concerned. There is no need to be saved because there is nothing from which to be saved. God will never punish anyone; there is no hell to fear.

Second, if God's wrath doesn't exist, then Jesus didn't suffer God's wrath on the cross, He just died as a martyr. That means His death has no ability to save anyone because He didn't die in our place.

As Paul explained the gospel in the first chapters of his Roman epistle, God's wrath is a predominant theme, and no wonder. He asserted that God's wrath is not only something

⁵⁹ See Judg. 9:22-24; 1 Sam. 16:14-23; Mal. 3:8-11; Matt. 18:21-35; 1 Cor. 5:1-5.

¹² For a thorough treatment of this subject, see Leon Morris' *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, pp. 177-84.

¹³ For New Testament examples of God's wrath being administered by God Himself, see Luke 12:4-5; Acts 12:23; 13:11; 1 Cor. 3:17; Jas. 4:12; Rev. 2:21-23; 22:18-19. The Old Testament has too many examples to list.

people will experience some day, but it is a present reality. God's wrath is not just *going to be* revealed; Paul stated that it *is being* revealed.

Of course, those who have read the Old Testament know that many of the wars, tragedies, and calamities of human history were a result of God's sovereign judgment upon evildoers. But Paul went even further, stating three times in the first chapter that God is actively judging people at present by "turning them over" to practice increasing decadence along with its consequent suffering.

Putting God's Kindness in Perspective

In the second chapter of Romans, Paul takes an even stronger stand for God's wrath:

And we know that the *judgment of God* rightly falls upon those who practice such things. And do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment upon those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape *the judgment of God*? [Of course, the thought is preposterous.] Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up *wrath* for yourself in the day of *wrath* and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every man according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth but obey unrighteousness, *wrath* and *indignation*. There will be *tribulation* and *distress* for every soul of man who does evil" (Rom. 2:2-9, emphasis added).

It is incredible that some have taken Paul's statement, "the kindness of God leads you to repentance," as a proof that we should never mention God's wrath, hell, or judgment when preaching the gospel. "Just tell them about God's love," they say, "because it's the kindness of God that leads people to repentance."

But that very statement ("the kindness of God") is found nested among several other sentences that repeatedly declare God's wrath and the terrible fate that awaits the unrepentant! God's kindness is best seen in the light of His holiness, wrath, and judgment. God's kindness is revealed by His sending Jesus to suffer His wrath in our stead, so that we could escape His wrath. Truly, the greater revelation one gains of humanity's sinfulness and God's wrath, the greater revelation one gains of God's amazing love displayed in Christ.

Notice also that God's kindness is said to lead people to repentance. When people respond to the true gospel, they are naturally led to repent because they understand that their sins are what separate them from God. Then they comprehend *why* Jesus suffered and died.

Just telling people that God is kind provides no stimulus to repentance. People must hear the "word of the cross," which means they will hear about humanity's sin, God's wrath, and Jesus the sin-bearer. If their hearts are soft, they'll repent and receive Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Safe from God's Wrath

After using fifty-nine sentences to lay a foundation of two truths—namely humanity's guilt and God's holy wrath—Paul then arrives at the climax of his gospel. In Romans 3:21-28, he explains how Jesus saves us from God's wrath. Let's examine this passage, piece by piece:

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested (Rom. 3:21a).

Paul had previously stated that the gospel reveals God's righteousness. Here we read that God's righteousness is manifested by something other than the Law. Of course, he must be speaking of the gospel of Christ's substitutionary death. Through its many commandments and promised punishments, the Law revealed that God is righteous. The gospel also reveals it because Jesus died for sins—our sins.

I might add that if Jesus was not crucified for our sins, then His death would prove that God is unrighteous, due to the fact that Jesus was an innocent man.

Paul went on to write that God's righteousness was

witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace (Rom. 3:21b-24a).

Just as our sins were imputed to Christ, God's righteousness is imputed to us once we believe the gospel. It comes through Jesus as a gift of God's grace, that is, His undeserved favor.

Through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith (Rom. 3:24b-25a).

The word *propitiate* means "to appease or to turn away anger." Paul points out that when Jesus was shedding His blood on the cross, God was publicly displaying Him as the one who would avert God's anger against us.

This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just [righteous] and the justifier [the One who makes people righteous] of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 25b-26; italics are NASB).

As Paul stated in his introduction and here explained, the gospel of Jesus' death reveals God's righteousness.

Leon Morris elucidates this passage:

The fact that God had not always punished sin with full severity in the past, but had "passed over" such sin, gave rise to the danger that He might not appear to men to be completely righteous. But now, in the cross, He has forever removed that danger. He has shown Himself to be completely righteous.¹⁴

Finally, we read verses 27-28:

Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law (Rom. 3:27-28).

¹⁴Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, p. 278.

The message of Christ's substitutionary death eradicates the idea that our good works could save us. In fact, His death reveals the magnitude of our debt of sin. If it were possible for us to be saved by works, then there would have been no need for the Son of God to suffer and die. Righteousness cannot be earned—it is offered freely because of Jesus' sacrifice. He earned it for us.

In Roman's chapter 5, Paul listed the primary blessing that we receive because of Jesus' death—escape from God's wrath:

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him (Rom. 5:8-9).

It would be unjust for God to punish the same sin twice. Therefore, because Christ was punished, those of us who have believed the gospel need not fear God's wrath. Praise God!

Two Commonly Asked Questions

In reference to the above-quoted scripture and others like it, a question often arises: How can Christ's *blood* be said to save us? Does Paul mean that we are saved by Jesus' red and white blood cells, His platelets, glucose, amino acids, carbon dioxide, urea, and plasma? No. Leon Morris in his book, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, has very thoroughly and convincingly proven that the word "blood"—as it is most often used in Scripture—simply refers to violent death.¹⁵

We say that Christ's blood saves us just as we might say that the cross saves us. Obviously two beams of wood are not what saves us, but what happened upon those beams. J. Behm wrote, "Like the cross...the 'blood of Christ' is simply another and even more graphic phrase for the death of Christ in its soteriological [salvation] significance."¹⁶

Another commonly asked question is, How could Jesus' brief suffering on the cross serve as payment for people who were condemned to suffer eternally in hell?

The answer lies in the fact of who did the suffering. It wasn't an ordinary man hanging on the cross—it was God. Whether we fully understand it or not, in the court of heaven, Jesus' suffering was declared sufficient to atone for the sins of humanity. Of that, we can be sure.

An illustration, although perhaps a poor one, may be helpful. Imagine that your German shepherd attacks and kills your neighbor's poodle. For justice to be done, you would be required to pay the man for the loss of his dog.

If he demands absolute justice, then he might ask that your dog be killed so that you would suffer just as he has. In that case, not only would you suffer for the irresponsibility of letting your German shepherd loose, but your dog would also suffer, reaping exactly what he had sown.

But imagine your neighbor, rather than demanding your dog's death, demands *your* death! You would certainly object, knowing that you have infinitely more value than your neighbor's poodle. Even if your German shepherd killed every other dog in your city, it would still not require your execution.¹⁷

¹⁵ See Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, pp. 112-26.

¹⁶ G. Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* Vol. 1, p. 174.

¹⁷ The reason this illustration is imperfect is because dogs are not held morally responsible for their actions, as men are. God is not responsible for the immoral actions of man, as the owner is responsible for his dog's

Because it was the divine Son of God who suffered, His sufferings had infinite value, certainly sufficient to atone for the sins of humanity.

We can speculate that *if* God could have found one sinless human being who would have been willing to die as a substitute, then that substitute would have had to spend an eternity in hell. Such suffering, however, would have only been sufficient to atone for one other human being. However, the Person who did suffer on the cross for us had infinitely greater value than all humans combined, as they are just a creation, and He is their Creator.

Although we know Jesus' suffering was of a short duration (relative to eternity), we really have no comprehension as to the degree He actually suffered. It's impossible for us to imagine the agony Jesus endured when God's full cup of wrath was poured out on Him. At the end of it all, however, God saw "the anguish of His soul" as Isaiah said,¹⁸ and was satisfied. Justice had been meted out to the human race in the person of the Son of God.

misconduct. However, God the Son voluntarily took the liability for man's sin, suffering on behalf of lesser persons.

¹⁸Is. 53:11