

IN MY PLACE CONDEMNED HE STOOD - The Biblical Pattern of the Atonement - Part two - Sunday, May 8th, 2022 - Teaching #2187
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JESUS CAME BECAUSE GOD LOVED US - BUT WHY DID HE HAVE TO DIE?

IPAD TEXT - John 3:16-19, 36 - “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. [17] For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. [18] Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. [19] And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil....36....Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”

The most loving person who ever walked the face of the earth spoke the most about God’s wrath against sin and His eternal judgment of sinners. He linked His coming to earth and His death on the cross with the urgency of dealing with the wrath of God that rested on all people. That’s how Jesus assessed the *reason* for His life and death on the cross:

Here are some of the essential components of the meaning of the cross in the mind of our Lord:

- 1) **INDIVIDUALS PERISH AND ARE CONDEMNED FOR THEIR UNBELIEF IN THE SAVING WORK OF JESUS CHRIST**

There are two speakers in this collection of verses. First we hear from Jesus and then from the Apostle John. The message is one and the same. First, Jesus says He must die because without His death people would “**perish**”(16). To save from this perishing is **why** the Father “**gave**” the Son on the cross. And we know that **perishing** doesn’t mean merely **dying** because even people who believe in Jesus will eventually die physically. Perishing is what happens **after** you die. Perishing is something much, much worse than physical death. Perishing comes from sinners facing the holy wrath of God.

We **know** this to be the case because of something else Jesus said. He said sinners stand “**condemned**”(18). And He said sinners are condemned “**already.**” That means that **right now** people have a deadly problem. It’s worse than cancer or COVID or poverty or crime or war or pollution. People stand “**condemned.**”

That means right now, while they eat, drink, work, read, play golf, check the markets, give blood to the Red Cross, give money to charities, cure diseases, get involved in the religions of the world, and raise children, they are under the fierce wrath of a holy God. Unless Jesus is a liar, it doesn’t matter how nice we think these people are or how sincere they are. They all stand under God’s wrath. They’re all guilty. They’re all condemned - right now.

And Jesus doesn't mean sinners stand condemned **by their own conscience**. It's not **feelings** of condemnation Jesus is talking about here. There are lots of people who **feel** no condemnation whatsoever while they fall short of the glory of God. No. Just do the work with the words of the text. Jesus and John are talking about the just condemnation **of God** that will eventually lead to their **perishing** in the face of His judgment (36). This is made perfectly clear by the way the condemnation from God is because of their refusal to **"believe in the name of the only Son of God"**(18). Nothing else they do can substitute for this failure.

2) **THE REASON FOR THIS "CONDEMNATION" AND "PERISHING" IS THE WRATH OF ALMIGHTY GOD**

The words of the **apostle John** sum up the same thoughts in an even more striking manner - **John 3:36 - "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."** - IPAD TEXT

Jesus said people would **"perish"** for not believing in His saving work. Now John tells us even more directly the **cause** of their perishing.

The cause isn't their cursing or their theft or their murder or their abuse of their neighbor or the destroying of the environment. And the cause isn't the Devil. Technically, the cause of their perishing isn't even their **unbelief**. Their unbelief merely triggers the problem. The immediate **cause** of their perishing is the "**wrath of God**" against their unbelief. John says everyone is under the wrath of God.

Only Jesus **removes** the wrath of God. This is made clear by the way John says, apart from believing in Jesus and obeying Jesus, the "**wrath of God remains**" on the unbeliever (36). In other words - and this is vitally important - the **wrath of God** is where the **condemnation** and the **perishing** come from. Only Jesus' death on the cross removes both of these.

3) **WE NEED TO ANALYZE THE REASON OR REASONS FOR THE MASSIVE SHIFT AWAY FROM THE SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT THEOLOGY**

Why is this message losing traction among contemporary evangelicals? Why isn't this message the theme of the hip best-sellers? What exactly is it that makes people like Baptist pastor Steven Chalk say, ***“The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child-abuse - a vengeful father, punishing his son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside the church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement ‘God is love.’ If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.”***

We're going to look at Chalk's second objection - that the substitutionary atonement makes a mockery of Jesus' teaching that we're to love our enemies - in future weeks. But if we study these words carefully we can start to see what's so offensive in the gospel of the substitutionary atonement. There are essentially ***two elements*** of the atoning death of Christ in the New Testament that collide with our culture's current mind-set.

- a) ***The first is that we are currently under God's wrath because of our unbelief.***

In Chalk's own words we find the idea of God's wrath against sinners to be "***....in total contradiction to the statement 'God is love.'***" This is also the stated position of Bruxy Cavey and Greg Boyd and Brian Zahnd. More than that, however, is the simple fact that people aren't going to feel ***drawn*** to a God of wrath. So, it is argued, we should delete this from our presentation of the gospel to the unreached mind.

No one likes to think he or she is that bad. If God is loving we shouldn't need rescue from wrath. People want to hear about a God who ***affirms*** them, ***suffers*** with them (to be sure), and above all, ***just loves them as they are.*** After all, we don't like being around ***people*** who are angry with us, so we sure don't want to come to a God who self-proclaims that His "***wrath remains on us***"(John 3:36).

From our point of view it all just makes sense. Add to this the New Testament teaching that we are not quite as beautiful inside as we might often be told and the situation gets even more desperate: **Ephesians 2:1-3 - “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins [2] in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— [3] among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” - IPAD TEXT**

The important phrase is that last one. We are all - just like the rest of mankind - “....**by nature children of wrath....**” This packs quite a punch. It means I didn’t **become** an object of God’s wrath because I told a **lie** and **then** God’s wrath came upon me. It wasn’t that I committed **theft** and **then** became a person under God’s wrath.

No. Paul says I was **born** - I came into this world and **drew breath** - as a child of God’s wrath. What I **am** - a child of God’s eternal wrath - I am by **nature**. It’s what I’m made up of - how I’m framed - how I’m wired or programmed - that makes me a child of God’s wrath.

This is a huge problem indeed. It's very bad news. It means my problem isn't one I can change by myself. It isn't just a matter of my **actions** needing reforming. I can't change my own **nature**. And Paul says I'm "**by nature**" a child of wrath.

- b) ***The second part of the atonement found to be offensive is the way in which the New Testament says Father God punishes the Son for my sin.***

Even if it may be nice to be off the hook, it seems such a travesty of justice and contrary to sheer logic that another person **should** or even **could** bear my guilt. Can someone else really pay for my sin the same way I might give you \$100 to pay your phone bill? Are sins that transferable?

It is almost frightening to read the depths of anger and mockery with which some theological writers approach this issue. I'll just take time to give one striking example of those who deny the justice of Christ being punished on the cross for our sins.

Consider these words by **Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin** in their book, "**Stricken By God? Non-violent Identification and the Victory of Christ**":

“Hardin writes of receiving an evangelical mass mailing just days after a recent tragedy in which a number of Amish school children were savagely murdered. The flier invited people to church, where they would hear that on the cross God punished Jesus for our sins: “Jesus took the place of sinners,” the church mailing read. Hardin sees a direct parallel between the God of this gospel and the angry gunman in the Amish schoolhouse. Reportedly, the gunman acted out of anger for the death of his own daughter some years earlier. Police overheard him telling his victims, “I’m going to make you pay for my daughter.”

Now, sit up straight and give your head a shake so you’re awake to take in this next part. ***Hardin writes, “The atonement sought by the shooter...is no different than that sought by the God of that evangelical mail-out. For both, blood satisfies, and in both, innocent blood, truly innocent blood was shed.”***

This is a more graphic way of expressing the same distaste for the substitutionary atonement as is expressed by ***Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong***, who wrote, ***“I would choose to loathe rather than to worship a deity who required the sacrifice of his son.”***

Or consider the words of evangelical pastor and author **Gregory Boyd** who, in his book, *“The Nature of the Atonement,”* says, *“How is the view that God requires a kill to have his rage placated essentially different from the pagan or magical understanding of divine appeasement found in primordial religions?”*

I’m going to take up each of these objections in future weeks. But right now they lead to my fourth and closing point:

4) **IT WILL TAKE CONSIDERABLY MORE DETERMINATION AND COURAGE FOR THE CHURCH TO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL TODAY THAN A SINGLE GENERATION AGO**

There is no denying that the ground is shifting around the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ. To some degree this has always been so. The cross of Jesus has always been the place where the world divides. It is the fulcrum on which the lever of history tips one way or the other.

What's different **today** is the offense of the cross isn't just where Paul told us to look for it. It isn't just among the Jews who look to the keeping of the law of God, and it isn't just among the pagan Gentiles who see it as foolishness. No. The message of the cross is becoming extremely offensive in the visible evangelical church. And that view is gaining considerable momentum - especially in Millennials and GenXers.

I want to prepare us as we close by examining **why** this is so. Primarily, I think there are **two** reasons.

- a) ***First, while there are other additional meanings to the atonement in the New Testament*** (Peter says Jesus suffered to leave us an example of how to face unjust persecution and suffering), ***the substitutionary, divine wrath-bearing death of God the Son for our sins is the unique claim of the Christian gospel. There are no parallels in the religious world. This is the essence of gospel uniqueness.***

And what that means is we appear the most ***unbending*** in the eyes of the religions of the world precisely at this one point of proclamation. And in today's shrinking, multi-cultural global village that point of exclusive missional proclamation is a religious lightning rod as it never was before. Many of those who are offended by it live next door to you. You can't hide this proclamation from the millions of bloggers who stand poised to shout out your ***intolerance***.

So this is the first reason for the compromise in the evangelical church. Those who will persecute you for your view of the atonement aren't across an ocean. They're in the same office. Those timidly committed to Christ are weeded out by the fact that there are no longer any safe places to proclaim Him as Redeemer.

- b) ***There has never been a generation in the church of Christ who has been more culturally trained to measure the content of its own message by the reaction of those who hear it.***

This is another in the long list of tragic results to the **re-defining - the psychologizing** - of the gospel. As our message gets increasingly **therapeutic** in the religious best-sellers we will measure how **loving** the message is by the **reaction** of those we are trying to reach. If someone doesn't **like** what I say, then I must be **unloving** to say it. If someone is **offended** by what I say, then what I'm saying **must be offensive**.

Of course, that isn't true at all. Jesus was constantly offending people by what He said. But it still has the feel of something logical, though absolutely untrue. The love in my heart isn't measured by the way you **react** to what I say. The love in my heart is only truly measured by **urgency** of what I say and the **motive in my own heart as I say it**. Just because someone doesn't **react** well to what I proclaim doesn't mean I wasn't loving in my proclamation of it.

There is no end to the drift from Biblical truth if this is forgotten. Once we measure the love content of the truth by the reaction of the hearer we will change not only our **presentation** of the message, but the **content of the message** if people don't like what we say. As John Piper says, the **"offended hearer takes on a power that once belonged only to the Bible."**

So I finish with my opening thought. Never did a more loving Person breath than our blessed Lord and Savior. And He talked the most about the wrath of Father God against our sin. Whenever we lovingly tell this stubborn world that without Christ's wrath-bearing, sin cancelling, kingdom bringing death on the cross, it is lost in its dark, proud, unbelief, we do it no dis-service. The church is the most loving when she is most faithful to this truth and her proclamation of it.

It's going to get harder, not easier. We'll have to be bolder, not cowardly or timid. More will be personally at stake, not less. But let's understand and proclaim the love-filled truth of our Savior's death.