

A Mercy So Great it Defies Explanation

John 12: 41—“Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.”

Galatians 6:14—“May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...”

Martin Luther—“There is not a word in the Bible which can be understood without reference to the cross.”

P. T. Forsyth—“Christ is to us what the Cross is. All that Christ was in heaven or on earth was put into what he did there. *You do not understand Christ until you understand his cross.*”¹

Thomas Jones—“Therefore no doctrine of scripture faithfully set before men unless it is displayed in its relationship to the cross.”

D. A. Carson— “In the modern church the central has become peripheral and the periphery is in danger of displacing the center. The center is the cross.” ~

Sinclair Ferguson— “When we think of Christ dying on the cross we are shone the lengths to which God’s love goes to in order to win us back to himself. He is saying to us, “I love you this much!” The cross is the heart of the gospel. It make the gospel good news. Christ died for us. He has stood in our place before God’s judgment seat. He has bourn our sins. God has done something on the cross we could never do for ourselves. *The reason we lack assurance of his grace is because we fail to focus on that spot where he has revealed it.*”

Introduction

To understand the gospel we must grasp at least four things:

1. The sinfulness and corruption of man
2. The holiness and justice of God

- a. This is just another way of saying “Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves”²

¹ P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1909), 44-45.

² Calvin, John, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 volumes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), vol. 1, 37.

3. The reaction of a holy God to our sinfulness is summed up in one word: wrath.

4. Propitiation

Our sinfulness and corruption:

- *Isaiah 64:6b-7a*—“...all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf and like the wind our sins sweep us away. **No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you...**”
- *Jeremiah 13:23*—“Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? **Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil.**”
- *Romans 8:6-8*—“The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; ⁷the sinful mind is hostile to God. **It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.** ⁸Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.”
- *1 Corinthians 2: 14*—“The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and **he cannot understand them**, because they are spiritually discerned.”

The Holiness & Justice of God

- I Covered Last Week

The Wrath of God

- *D.A. Carson*: “In the Bible, God’s wrath is a function of His holiness. His wrath or anger is not the explosion of a bad temper or a chronic inability to restrain His irritability, but rather *a just and principled opposition to sin*. God’s holiness is so spectacularly glorious that **it demands** that He be wrathful with those of His creatures who defy Him, slight His majesty, thumb their noses at his words and works, and insist on their own independence even though every breath they breathe, not to say their very existence, depends on His providential care. If God were to gaze at sin and rebellion, shrug His shoulders and mutter, ‘Well, I’m not too bothered. I can forgive these people. I don’t really care what they do,’ **surely there would be something morally deficient about Him.**”
- *Joni Eareckson Tada and Steven Estes*: “...the doctrine of hell...slaps the sleeping in the face and says, ‘Don’t you understand the nonsense you’re entertaining? Don’t you see the seriousness of your self-righteousness? *You* may think you’re measuring up. But God is angry enough to punish you eternally. He is holy beyond your wildest dreams, and you have offended him beyond your imagination.’”

- **Psalm 7:11**—“God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day.”
 - Note the connection between **righteousness/justice** (NKJV) and **wrath**
- **Psalms 76:10**—“Surely your wrath against men brings you praise & the survivors of your wrath are restrained.”
- **J. I. Packer**: “The modern habit throughout the Christian church is to play this subject down. Those who still believe in the wrath of God (not all do) say little about it; perhaps they do not think much about it. To an age which has unashamedly sold itself to the gods of greed, pride, sex and self-will, the church mumbles on about God's kindness but says virtually nothing about his judgment... The fact is that the subject of divine wrath has become taboo in modern society, and Christians by and large have accepted the taboo and conditioned themselves never to raise the matter.”³
- **C. J. Mahaney**: “Understanding the necessity of the cross begins with recognizing the reality of God's wrath. Without wrath Grace cannot be understood. Without wrath there mercy is meaningless. Without wrath the cross is unnecessary. Without wrath there is no gospel.”⁴
- **Grudem**: “God's wrath means that he intensely hates all sin.”⁵
- **D. A. Carson**: “In the Bible God's wrath is a function of His holiness [and justice]... That is why in Scripture God is sometimes portrayed as blisteringly angry.”⁶
- **God's anger is not like ours.**
 - This is not the same type of thing as a person that has experienced “anger” from an abusive parent.
- **John Stott**: “The wrath of God is his steady, unrelenting, unremitting, uncompromising antagonism to evil in all its forms and manifestations. In short, God's anger is poles apart from ours. What provokes his anger (evil), seldom provokes ours.”⁷
- **C. J. Mahaney**: “God's wrath cannot be satisfied through human activity. His wrath can never be set aside by human activity... And there is nothing anyone... can ever do, originating in and of themselves, to remove that wrath from resting on their lives. In its justified and terrifying form.”⁸
- **D. A. Carson**: “... it is important that we reject that common evangelical cliché on this subject: “God hates the sin but loves the sinner.” The second part may be true, but as it stands this antithesis is fundamentally mistaken and is clearly

³ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1973), 148-149.

⁴ C. J. Mahaney, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, 4 vols. (Gaithersburg: PDI, 2002), 1:1.

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 1994).

⁶ D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 38.

⁷ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1986), 173.

⁸ C. J. Mahaney.

refuted by Scripture. For example, fourteen times in the first fifty psalms alone the texts insist that God “hates” sinners, “abhors” those who tell lies, and so forth.”⁹

Propitiation: The Cross of Christ

Four different aspects of the pain that Jesus experienced:

1. Physical pain and death

- a. **Grudem:** “We do not need to hold that Jesus suffered more physical pain than any human being has ever suffered, for the Bible nowhere makes such a claim.”¹⁰
- b. **Grudem:** “When the criminal’s arms were outstretched and fastened by nails to the cross, he had to support most of the weight of his body with his arms. The chest cavity would be pulled upward and outward, making it difficult to exhale in order to be able to draw a fresh breath. But when the victim’s longing for oxygen became unbearable, he would have to push himself up with his feet, thus giving more natural support to the weight of his body, releasing some of the weight from his arms, and enabling his chest cavity to contract more normally. By pushing himself upward in this way the criminal could fend off suffocation, but it was extremely painful because it required putting the body’s weight on the nails holding the feet, and bending the elbows and pulling upward on the nails driven through the wrists. The criminal’s back, which had been torn open repeatedly by a previous flogging, would scrape against the wooden cross with each breath.”¹¹

2. The pain of bearing sin

- a. **Grudem:** “More awful than the pain of physical suffering that Jesus endured was the psychological pain of bearing the guilt for our sin...Jesus was perfectly holy. He hated sin with his entire being.”¹²

3. Abandonment

- a. **Grudem:** “Far worse than desertion by even the closest of human friends was the fact that Jesus was deprived of the closeness to the Father that had been the deepest joy of his heart for all his earthly life. When Jesus cried out ‘*Eli, Eli, lam sabachthani?*’ that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Matt. 27:46), he showed that he was finally cut off from the sweet fellowship with his heavenly Father that had been the

⁹ D. A Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 38.

¹⁰ Grudem, 572.

¹¹ Grudem, 572.

¹² Grudem, 573.

unfailing source of his inward strength...As Jesus bore our sins on the cross, he was abandoned by his heavenly Father, who is 'of purer eyes than to behold evil' (Hab. 1:13). He faced the weight of the guilt of millions of sins alone."¹³

4. Bearing the wrath of God.

- What the puritans calls the very heart of the gospel
- **Romans 3: 25**—"21But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it-- 22the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 23for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (ESV).

- God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—*NIV*

For there is no distinction: 23for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

- Note that the very essence of sin has to do with not esteeming God's glory.

24and are justified by his grace as a gift,

- We will talk about justification next week.

through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

- **Leon Morris:** Redemption means "deliverance at a cost" or "release by payment" of a price.¹⁴
- So here is the foundation of our justification: Christ gave his life as a ransom for many. He paid the price for our release from sin and guilt and condemnation.

25whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood,

- **Illustration:** Trish and I at the restaurant in Edmonds

- **C. J. Mahaney:** "The wrath of God is not taken seriously by our culture. That is to be expected. What is unacceptable is when there is a lack of appreciation and understanding of the wrath of God within the church."¹⁵
- **J. I. Packer:** "God's wrath is never the capricious, irritable and morally ignoble thing that human anger so often is. *It is instead, the right and neces-*

¹³ Grudem, 574.

¹⁴ Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955, 40-45).

¹⁵ C. J. Mahaney, 1.

sary reaction to objective moral evil. The wrath of God in the Bible is always judicial—that is, it is administering justice. The man who experiences the fullness of God’s wrath receives precisely what he deserves”¹⁶

- **Grudem:** “As Jesus bore the guilt of our sins alone, God the Father, the mighty Creator, the Lord of the universe, poured out on Jesus the fury of his wrath: Jesus became the object of the intense hatred of sin and vengeance against sin which God had patiently stored up since the beginning of the world.”¹⁷
- **1 John 2:2:** “...*He Himself is the propitiation for our sins.*”
- **D. A. Carson:** “It is a glorious truth that although God is angry with us, in his very character he is a God of love. Despite his anger as he perceives our anarchy—anger that is a necessary function of his holiness—God is a loving God and therefore provides a means of forgiving sins, one that will leave the integrity of his glory unsullied. He comes to us in the person of his Son. His Son dies as the propitiation for our sin. That is, he dies to ensure that God becomes favorable toward us in precisely those areas where God has been opposed to us in judgment and wrath...in the Bible God is both the origin and the object of the propitiating sacrifice. He provides it by sending his Son to the cross; yet at the same time, the sacrifice satisfies his own honor, and his righteous wrath is turned away without his holiness being impugned.”¹⁸
- **1 John 4: 10—**“Herein is love, **not** that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”
 - (1 John 4:11—...¹¹Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”)
- **Richard Allen Bodey** “*Christ drained the cup of God’s wrath bone dry, leaving not a drop for us to drink.*¹⁹”

to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

- They mean that now and for centuries God has been doing what Psalm 103:10 says, “He does not deal with us according to our sins or repay us according to our iniquities.” He has been passing over thousands of sins. He has been forgiving them and letting them go and not punishing them.

¹⁶ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 176.

¹⁷ Grudem, 575.

¹⁸ Carson, 38.

¹⁹ Richard Allen Bodey, *The Voice From the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 62.

- King David is a good example. In 2 Samuel 12 he is confronted by the prophet Nathan for committing adultery with Bathsheba and then having her husband killed. Nathan says, "Why have you despised the word of the Lord?" (2 Samuel 12:9).
 - David feels the rebuke of Nathan, and in verse 13 he says, "I have sinned against the Lord." To this, Nathan responds, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die." Just like that! Adultery and murder are "passed over." It is almost incredible. Our sense of justice screams out, "No! You can't just let it go like that. He deserves to die or be imprisoned for life!" But Nathan does not say that. He says, "The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die."
 - When Nathan confronts David, he quotes God as saying, "Why have you despised me?" We could imagine David saying, "What do you mean, I despised you? I didn't despise you. I wasn't even thinking of you. I was just hot after this bathing woman, and then scared to death that people were going to find out. You weren't even in the picture."
 - And God would have said, "The Creator of the universe, the designer of marriage, the fountain of life, the one who holds you in being, the one who made you king - that One, I the Lord, was not even in the picture! That's right, David. That's exactly what I mean. You despised me."
-
- **Hebrews 2:17** Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, *to make propitiation for the sins of the people.*
 - **William Temple:** "All is of God; the only thing of my very own which I contribute to my redemption is the sin from which I need to be redeemed."²⁰
 - **Luther** writing to a monk in distress about his sins: "Learn to know Christ and him crucified. Learn to sing to him and say 'Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, I am your sin. You took on you what was mine; yet set on me what was yours. You became what you were not, that I might become what I was not.'"²¹

What is the practical upshot of this?

- We frequently live as though God isn't really mad at us, but that he is still annoyed or irritated with us.
- Acts of godliness are meaningless unless they are tied, by faith, to the doctrine of Christ's atonement.

²⁰ William Temple, as quoted by Stott, 197.

²¹ Martin Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, p. 110.

- Illustration:
 - The movie “Outbreak”
 - Imagine that there are four people with a virus worse than Ebola
 - Person one: Has the virus but has taken the vaccine
 - He looks terrible, but he is on his way to recovery
 - Person two: has not taken the vaccine, but is taking great pains to care for all of his blisters and the lesions on his skin
 - He looks pretty good, but is a dead-man walking
 - Person three: has taken the vaccine and is caring for his lesions
 - Looks good and will live
 - Person four: has the virus and is not doing anything to care for lesions
 - Looks terrible and is dead
 - The point is that the lesions tell you almost nothing about whether a person has the cure or not. The only thing that ultimately matters is whether a person has the vaccine or not.
 - Chris is the vaccine.

- We were saved from the...
 - Penalty
 - Power
 - Presence

- I have heard it said, “God didn’t die for frogs. So he was responding to our value as humans.” This turns grace on its head. We are *worse* off than frogs. They have not sinned. They have not rebelled and treated God with the contempt of being inconsequential in their lives. God did not have to die for frogs. They aren’t bad enough. We are. Our debt is so great, only a divine sacrifice could pay it. There is only one explanation for God’s sacrifice for us. It is not us. It is “the riches of his grace” (Ephesians 1:7). It is all free. It is not a response to our worth. It is the overflow of his infinite worth. In fact, that is what divine love is in the end: a passion to enthrall undeserving sinners, at great cost, with what will make us supremely happy forever, namely, his infinite beauty.²²

²² John Piper, *The Passion of Jesus Christ*, p. 29.