

TJW, HT 9.15am & 11am, 24.5.09
Propitiation: God's anger turned away

Do you know that it is possible to get too familiar with the death of Christ? As the saying goes, familiarity sometimes does breed contempt.

You see, Jesus' death is shocking. It's obviously shocking in its brutality. Crucifixion was one of the most horrible methods of execution ever invented. The cross was an instrument of torture and death.

But the real shock of the cross goes beyond its physical brutality. The real shock of the cross is in the fact of who it is who is up there dying - and it's this shock that we can lose, when we get too familiar with it. This is the Son of God. The sinless one. Perfection himself. God and man together in one human being. The only one who ever lived his entire life in perfect harmony with God as his Father. It seems absurd and abhorrent that this man should die - let alone die in this way.

Someone who's new to the Christian faith maybe has a better chance of feeling the shocking absurdity of the cross. Those of us who've been Christians a long time need to pinch ourselves regularly, to stop ourselves falling into the feeling that the death of Jesus is just normal and obvious.

The horror of Jesus' death comes to its climax in one crucial moment, just before he died. It's recorded for us in Matthew 27.46;

About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?')

Here are the deepest depths of Jesus' pain on the cross. And at this moment his suffering is not just his physical pain. It's not just his distress at all his friends deserting him.

His deepest suffering is because he's experiencing the black hole, the abyss, of God abandoning him for a moment, God turning his back on him.

No one else in the history of the world was less prepared for that experience. He knew it was coming, because a few days earlier he'd prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Father, if it is possible, please let me be spared this," and he literally sweated blood at the prospect.

But when the moment came to him it was surely more awful than he could ever have imagined. All his life he'd lived moment by moment with God as his Father, never once experiencing what we often experience - God's displeasure, or a feeling of his absence.

But now, at this crucial moment, he loses the one thing he's had his entire life - the sense that God is his loving Father, and he's God's beloved Son.

All he can do is cry out, saying not "my Father" - but simply, "my God". All his experience of God's presence with him, and God's love for him, is ripped away from him, for one awful moment.

We may have experienced something of that in our own lives - when it feels to us as if God has withdrawn from us all his presence

and love. If so, that is for us a small taste of the ocean of ‘separation from God’ that Jesus was plunged into at that moment.

There’s one word which Bibles in English have often used to describe that moment - to explain to us why Jesus experienced that moment of horror. It’s the word ‘propitiation’ - Jesus was our ‘propitiation’. It’s not a word we often use now - and so our modern Bibles, like the one we have in church, replace it with something which in a way is more helpful and understandable. They say, Jesus was our ‘atoning sacrifice’.

Here’s what ‘propitiation’ means: God’s wrath turned away from us, and so his favour turned towards us, as Christ died on the cross as a sacrifice for us.

When a child misbehaves and gets punished (say with five minutes on the naughty step!) and a parent has shown their anger, what does a wise parent do next? We all know, don’t we, that the best wisdom is that a parent should then hug their child, say “I love you”, and show them that their righteous anger is over, because it’s been dealt with, and the punishment has been and gone. That’s the moment of propitiation - anger turned away, and favour restored.

It’s Jesus’ death that turns away God’s wrath from us. And let’s look together at a part of the Bible that says this to us, simply and powerfully. It’s 1 John chapter 4 (not John’s Gospel, but his first letter). Here are the two key verses, verses 9 & 10; *This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the*

world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Christ’s death is the atoning sacrifice for our sins - so **in the death of Jesus, God’s wrath is turned away.**

God’s wrath isn’t mentioned directly in these verses, but it’s the great background that’s just assumed here, that makes these verses make sense. It’s like the scenery back-drop at a stage-play, that sets the scene for the action going on in front of your eyes.

We all know that for some people the idea of God as wrathful or angry is unthinkable. You’ll hear them say: “I want to think of God as loving, not angry.”

But if we want to worship the God whom Jesus shows to us, and not the fairy-tale god of our imagination, then we will take God’s wrath seriously, because he talked about it all the time.

You see, we have to be convinced in heart, as well as in mind, that human sin is an abhorrence to a holy God, and it’s only right that it provokes his wrath towards us.

Sin in the Bible doesn’t mean: a few really bad things we do.

Sin in the Bible does mean: a heart condition - and we’re all sick with it. It’s a deep attitude to God that doesn’t want him to be Lord in our lives. And the bad things we do are simply the tip of the iceberg, the symptoms of our condition.

It's easy to excuse ourselves - until we see ourselves against God's awesome, perfect holiness. An old towel that's been washed countless times can seem like it's still white, can't it, until you hold it up against a brand new one, that's sparkling white. Then you see how grubby and grey it really is. In the light of God's holiness, sin is an abhorrence, an awful crime committed by God's creatures in the world he's made.

And our sin rightly provokes God's wrath. I know that 'wrath' isn't a word we often use. But, you see, if I just talked about God's 'anger' then we might think that God's anger was like our anger. And what's our anger like? It's often uncontrolled. Unpredictable. Over the top. It's often selfish and vindictive. God's anger is so different to that, that it can help to use another word for it. God's anger, his wrath, is his steady, passionate, holy antagonism towards sin.

Now in that cry on the cross - "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" - Jesus was experiencing God's wrath at our sin, poured out on him.

As it says in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 21: 'he who had no sin was made sin for us'. At that moment the Son of God was treated as though he was not the Son, but Sin itself.

Right through the Old Testament, God had given his people sacrifices they could make, where something else suffered and died, bearing his wrath for their sin, in their place. A key one was called

the Day of Atonement. A goat was taken, and the sins of the whole people were symbolically placed on its head. Then it was driven out into the desert to die, carrying away the people's sin. (You can read about that in Leviticus chapter 16.)

When Christ died, he experienced for a moment being driven spiritually out into the wilderness, cast out of the paradise of God's presence and favour, as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. In Jesus' death, God's wrath is turned away from us.

And also in Jesus' death, **God shows his love**.

In any relationship, just saying "I love you" means very little. It's showing it that counts.

Jesus' death demonstrates God's love. Verse 9 of 1 John chapter 4 says: "This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son."

And Jesus' death also defines God's love. Verse 10 reads... *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

It's so tempting to say, "I prefer a God of love to a God of anger."

But do you see now how dangerous it is to play God's love off against his wrath?

The end of verse 8 defines God for us in three little words: "God is love".

And then God himself defines that love: "I sent my Son as the atoning sacrifice for your sins. He bore the brunt of my wrath against your sins in your place, so that you're free to know my love

and grace and favour.” If we strip God of his wrath, we strip him of his love.

Of course we should never dwell morbidly on our sin, or God’s wrath, just to do ourselves down. God tells us about these things in order to lead us to his love. But if we try to drum up God’s love, without dwelling on our sin and God’s wrath, then we’re like someone who tries to make a quick loaf of bread without using any yeast, or someone who tries to build a new house fast without bothering to put the foundations in. What you’ll end up with is a view of God’s love that’s flimsy, weak, unsatisfying.

When you feel wretched and weak, when you glimpse the depths of your own sin, you need a God who will not downplay your sin, just to make you feel better. You need a God who makes you face up to it, so that you can feel the depths of the love he showed you in dealing with it for you.

The strap-line for the Christianity Explored course that we use here gets it just right: “You’re more wicked than you ever realised - and more loved than you ever dreamed.” Play down the wickedness, and you play down the love.

Jesus’ death makes no sense if we get squeamish about talking about our sin and God’s wrath. If all that humanity needed was just a bit more spiritual wisdom, Jesus should have lived a comfortable life dishing out wisdom till he was an old man. If we just needed a bit more encouragement in being good, Jesus should have lived longer and given us motivational seminars in ‘how to live well’.

But we needed more than that. We needed someone to take God’s anger at our sin away from us. So he came and died, and took that punishment from us.

In Jesus’ death God’s wrath is turned away. God’s love is demonstrated. And there’s a third side to propitiation. In the death of Jesus, **God freely gives**.

Jesus’ death defines and demonstrates God’s love. So don’t ever think that Jesus is some poor unfortunate whom God picks on to take the bullet for us. That wouldn’t show God’s love, would it. It’s not exactly a great act of love to spare one person’s life by killing someone else.

Instead, we get to the deep truth of the cross when we remember that the man dying up there is also God himself. On the cross, God took all his righteous wrath at our sin, and lovingly turned it on himself, to spare us. The Son experienced the horror of being forsaken by his Father. The Father felt the awfulness of what was happening to his Son.

That is love... like a judge who sentences a man to death for his crimes, and then steps down and puts the noose around his own neck, to die in the man’s place.

God himself provides the sacrifice for sin that’s needed. And in Jesus, God is the sacrifice, he is the propitiation. He gives himself freely to death, through sheer love.

Yesterday was a day for getting out in the garden, wasn't it. I charged up the battery on my hedge-cutter, putting the power in, to make the thing work for long enough to cut my great long hedge. Now this teaching about propitiation should have many effects in the lives of Christians. But one of the most effective is that it should put power in us to spur us and equip us to love each other.

Did you see that in 1 John 4? The teaching on propitiation in verses 9-10 is put there to show us how to love each other - verse 7; *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.*

And verse 11; *Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

Do you see how it works? If I really know that God has turned his wrath at my sin away from, and taken it on himself out of love for me, that must empower me not to lash out at someone else in my frustration and anger. It must empower me to love them instead.

If you really want to love your fellow-Christians, you will deliberately feed yourself with the truth of God's propitiation.

If you love the truth of God's propitiation on the cross, you'll work hard to turn your knowledge into practical demonstrations of love.

And if God's love has really transformed us, then we won't dare say that we're loving people if we do barely more than most people do:

a few kindnesses here and there, mostly to people we already get on with.

We won't be satisfied until we are genuinely sacrificing ourselves - sacrificing our comfort, our leisure time, our dignity - for people we find unlovely, people we think are hostile to us.

There is much of that love already in our church family - as there should be.

Only that should be called Christian love, for only that is inspired and shaped by the sacrificial love God has shown us in Jesus.