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1

Wrath

ROMANS 1

*What is the
wrath of God
and how can
I avoid it?*

1 Wrath

ROMANS 1



DISCOVER

why God's wrath is an aspect of His love.



LEARN

how Jesus absorbed the wrath of God for us.



WORSHIP

because there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

I HAVE been fascinated by a recent advertisement that asks, “What do you want the Internet to be?” The point of the ad is that the Internet can be used to support almost any purpose. You can use the Internet to sell things, to gather information, or as an opportunity for meeting people with similar interests. The Internet is whatever you want it to be. The only limitations are the limits of human ingenuity.

Many people think about God in the same way as they think about the Internet. They assume that, like the Internet, God is essentially a product of human ingenuity and that writings about Him have been developed by man and for man, to meet his spiritual need.

It would, of course, follow that old ideas about God would be as useless and as laughable as technology that is fifty years out of date. The Bible would be a book of mere historical interest, which may contain some useful insights but would have no more authority for us today than the writings of Plato or Alexander the Great.

If all religions were of human origin, it would also follow that no religion could claim that its teaching about God is “the truth” or that the teaching of another religion about God is false.

These assumptions have penetrated deep into our culture, with the result that for many people the fundamental question is no longer, “Who is God?” but, “What do you want God to be?”

Of course, there is something very attractive about this, because if each of us can choose what we want God to be, then we can decide that God will be in favor of everything we pursue and against everything we oppose. Such a god would be like a large-screen projection of ourselves—god created by us and in our own image.

As we have followed the Bible story, we have discovered that there is one fundamental problem with this whole approach: God Himself!

THE GOD YOU CANNOT ALTER

The Bible story is all about the living God revealing Himself to us. The God of the Bible did not arise from the religious thoughts of Moses, Isaiah, and the other prophets. These men simply recorded the revelation that was given to them.

God broke into their lives, speaking directly to them in order to make Himself known. God revealed Himself to them so that, through the Scriptures, we may come to know Him.

When God introduces Himself to us in the Bible, He says, “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14). This is the first thing we need to know about God. He is not whoever we want Him to be: He is who He is. We cannot alter God.

I love the story of the woman who was extremely nervous about her wedding. She came to the rehearsal in a terrible state, worrying about where she should stand and the order in which things would happen.

The pastor tried to calm her fears and said to her, “Look, you don’t need to worry because it’s very simple. You walk down the aisle, you come up to the altar, and then we sing a hymn. It’s very easy. Down the aisle, up to the altar, sing the hymn. Got it?”

“Yes,” she said, “I think I can remember that.”

The following day, when the music for her entrance to the church began, she looked straight at her future husband and as she started her procession was heard to say, “aisle, altar, hymn, aisle, altar, hymn. . . . I’ll alter him.”

Some folks have married with that idea and it is usually the road to disaster, because while you may be able to make the Internet whatever you want it to be, you cannot make a person whatever you want him (or her) to be. Sooner or later that person will say, “Either accept me for who I am, or leave me alone, but I cannot be whatever you want.”

If that is true of us, it is certainly true of God. We can't alter Him. It matters very little what we want God to be. The important thing is that we discover who He is.

THE GOD WHO LOVES YOU

In our journey through the Bible story, we have discovered repeatedly that God is love. That means that God is absolutely committed to seek the good of all that He has made.

The Bible also tells us that God is holy. This means that God is absolutely opposed to anything that would destroy the objects of His love. God's holiness is a dimension of His love. You cannot love a person without, at the same time, hating that which would destroy him or her.

I will never forget being with a family who was caring for a son dying of cancer. One evening, the boy's mother said to me, "I hate this cancer." She said it with some venom, and understandably so. It was destroying her son, and she hated what was destroying the object of her love.

I think of another lady whose husband is an alcoholic. Over the years, alcohol has destroyed his life, and progressively it has destroyed every area of their marriage. She has remained loyal to him at great personal cost. One day she said to me, "I love him, but I hate what he has become." Her hatred of what destroyed her husband and of what he has become is a component of her love. Indeed, the day she stops hating what he has become would be the day she stops loving him.

Love and hate are often found together as natural partners in the Bible. "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil" (Romans 12:9). These are two sides of the same coin. If we do not hate what is evil, then there is no sincerity in our claim to love. The opposite of love is not hatred but indifference. True love hates all that destroys the one who is loved.

THE GOD WHO HATES WHATEVER DESTROYS YOU

God loves the world, and that means that He hates all that destroys the world. He is absolutely opposed to anything that would destroy the objects of His love. He hates what sin has done to us precisely because He loves us.

This is why God cannot and will not leave the world as it is. To do so would be a denial of love. God loves the world—that is why He relentlessly opposes all evil. God hates evil; He cannot be indifferent to it.

THE GOD WHO IS NEVER FRUSTRATED

God's relentless opposition to evil is good news, provided that He is able to overcome its destructive power. So we can be thankful that God is sovereign. This means that He is absolutely in control of all things. God is in a class of His own. There is no fact that He does not know, no place where He is not present, no task that He cannot accomplish, and no permission that He needs to seek.

The problem for the lady whose husband is an alcoholic is that she does not have the power to overcome what is destroying him. Her love is therefore frustrated. She has tried everything she can to separate the person she loves from the thing that is destroying him, but she can't do it. God is able to do all things. He is able to recover the people He loves from the people we have become. His love will not be frustrated.

God is absolutely committed to seek the good of the objects of His love. He is resolutely opposed to anything that would destroy those who are the objects of His love. He is completely in control of all things. God says, "I am who I am." He is love, He is holy, and He is sovereign.

This is not what some people would like God to be, but it is who He is, whether we like it or not. And we should be truly thankful. A god who did not love us would offer us no hope. A god who was not resolutely opposed to evil would be irrelevant, and a god who could not destroy evil would be useless in a world that suffers under the curse of its power.

WHAT MAKES GOD ANGRY?

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness. (ROMANS 1:18)

This wrath of God is not some kind of flaring rage, and we should not think of God losing control and lashing out in random acts of frustration. God's wrath is "a holy response to the unholy, a just reaction to the unjust, a pure rejection of the impure," wrote Stuart Briscoe.¹ God's wrath is His strong and settled opposition to all that is evil.

It is not in God's nature to be angry. God is love: That is His nature, and there has never been and never will be a time when He is not love. But God's anger is different. The Bible never says that God is wrath. In fact, God is slow to anger (Psalm 103:8). The Bible story demonstrates His great patience and tolerance

toward an evil world. But God can be provoked to anger, and Paul tells us that His anger is provoked by godlessness and wickedness.

A godless person is one who doesn't want anything to do with God. A wicked person is one who refuses to obey God. The godless and wicked person is someone who says to God, "I don't want to know You and I will not obey You."

In order to sustain this response to God, a person must "suppress the truth" that God has revealed about Himself. Picture a man pressing down on a powerful spring. He has to put his whole weight on it to keep the spring compressed. It takes sustained energy to do that. If the man lets up for a moment, the spring will recoil.

That is the picture Paul uses. It takes energy to go on resisting God. Those who want nothing to do with God have to work hard at avoiding Him because His revelation is all around us. God has made His divine power and His glory known in the splendors of creation (Romans 1:20).

A person who does not want to know God has to close his eyes to this revelation and keep up the pretense of believing that the beauties and order of the world are products of random chance. Many people choose to believe this today because they find the alternative unacceptable. They are determined not to acknowledge the glory of their Creator because they have decided that they will not obey Him.

The reason many people do not know the God of the Bible is not that He has failed to make Himself known, but that in our godlessness and wickedness, we have chosen not to know Him.

When people respond to God by saying, "We don't want to know You, we will not obey You, and we are going to pour our energy into patterns of belief and behavior that will keep Your truth as far from us as possible," God reveals His wrath. He cannot be indifferent to godlessness and wickedness. God loves the world; He cannot shrug as His world destroys itself.

THE GOD WHO LETS PEOPLE GO

God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts. (ROMANS 1:24)

God gave them over to shameful lusts. (v. 26)

He [God] gave them over to a depraved mind. (v. 28)

The words "wrath of God" may cause some people to think about God targeting wicked people with fork lightning or causing volcanoes to erupt over rebellious

communities, but that is not what Paul tells us in Romans 1. Sometimes we may wish that God would make a direct strike on the perpetrators of torture and mass murder. One day He will, but that is rarely how God's wrath operates in the world today.

Where an individual or a society says, "We do not want God and we will not obey God," God expresses His wrath by allowing their choice. God "[gives] them over" (v. 24). He stands back from those who do not want Him and will not obey Him and allows them to live with the full reality of their own choice.

That is precisely what happened in the Garden of Eden. God surrounded our first parents with good gifts, but they wanted to take the place of God themselves and chose not to obey Him. The first sin in the garden was an expression of godlessness and wickedness. Our first parents suppressed the truth, they chose the knowledge of evil, and God gave them over to it.

When I first presented this message to my congregation, I brought a crystal vase into the pulpit, held it high, and asked the congregation what would happen if I gave it up. (Someone rightly answered, "You'll get into trouble when you get home!")

If I "gave up" the vase, it would become subject to the pull of gravity. The vase would have no way of overcoming the powers that surround it. It would fall like a stone, and it would shatter.

That is exactly what happens when God "gives up" the godless and the wicked. When the godless say, "We do not want You," and the wicked say, "We will not obey You," God gives them up to their choice.



When God gives people up, society goes into a kind of moral free-fall.

When God gives them up, the godless and the wicked find themselves at the mercy of powers that are greater than themselves. Paul identified these powers as "sinful desires," "shameful lusts," and "a depraved mind."

If the evidence of God's wrath being revealed in our society is that people who do not want God and will not obey God find themselves in the grip of sinful desires, shameful lusts, and a depraved mind, I cannot avoid the conclusion that the wrath of God is clearly being revealed in our nation today.

If resistance to God and His commandments increases in our society, we will find ourselves increasingly overwhelmed by evils that arise from sinful desires, shameful lusts, and depraved minds. When God gives people up, society goes into a kind of moral free-fall to its own destruction. That is precisely what happened to the Roman Empire. It is the consistent pattern of God's judgment throughout history.

It may be that even as you read, you can see how sinful desires, shameful lusts, and a depraved mind are pulling you down. God has given you over to what you have chosen. Your only hope is that He may have mercy and save you. That opportunity is open to you today, but if you persist in the attitude that says to God, “I do not want You and I will not obey You,” the powers that hold you will lead to your destruction.

STORING UP WRATH

Do you show contempt for the riches of his [God's] kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. (ROMANS 2:4-5)

God's wrath is already being revealed, but only in part. History is riddled with evils that have never been brought to justice and lies that were never brought to light. Some perpetrators of evil seem to prosper through their crimes, and we wonder why God allows it to be so.

Paul says that people who refuse to turn to God in repentance are “storing up wrath.” There are many things that we may choose to store up, but wrath is not one of them. God shows great patience, kindness, and tolerance toward us. He does not treat us as our sins deserve. As we saw, He is slow to anger.

The purpose of His patience and kindness is to give us the opportunity of coming to Him in repentance. This would mean changing our whole disposition toward God, and then seeking to know Him and obey Him. Those who refuse that invitation are storing up wrath against themselves for the day of God's wrath when His righteous judgment will be revealed.

There will be a day when God's full hostility toward all that destroys the objects of His love will be revealed. When that day comes, the godless and the wicked will call on the rocks to fall on them (Revelation 6:16). They would rather be buried alive than face almighty God, but they will not be able to avoid Him.

God will destroy all that destroys us, and if we remain in what destroys us, then by definition we will be destroyed as well. The only hope is that there should somehow be a separation between me and the sin that would otherwise destroy me.

We have seen that God's wrath is being revealed in part today, and that it is being stored up for the day when His righteous judgment will be revealed toward those who refuse to repent. But the Bible speaks about a third occasion when the wrath of God was revealed.

GOD'S WRATH AT THE CROSS

God displayed [Jesus] publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. (ROMANS 3:25 NASB)

God presented Jesus as the one on whom His wrath was poured out. That's what the word "propitiation" means. God's relentless opposition to all that destroys us was poured out on the Lord Jesus Christ when He died on the cross.

Some people might question if this was really necessary. That was precisely the question Jesus raised in the agony of His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me" (Matthew 26:39). Jesus was saying, "If there is any other way for men and women to be saved besides Your wrath being poured out on Me, then let's not go down this road. But if this is the only way, then let Your will be done."

And so it was. "He . . . did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all" (Romans 8:32). Notice the phrase: God "gave him up"! God took His hand off His Son. He let Christ fall. He dropped Him into hell for you. That's why Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

[God] held Jesus accountable for all that destroys us.

Jesus had lived a perfect life. He was the very opposite of the godless and the wicked. The reason the wrath of God was poured out on Jesus was that "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21). God found a way of separating us from our sin. He separated the sins He hates from the people He loves by laying these sins on Jesus. Then He held Jesus accountable for all that destroys us. God laid our iniquity on Him, and He endured our punishment.

I did drop the glass vase in church that Sunday morning, and it fell as it was overwhelmed by the force of gravity. It caused a few gasps of surprise! But the vase was not destroyed, because having dropped it from my right hand, I caught it a few feet from the ground with my left. I gave the crystal vase up to the power of gravity that would lead to its destruction, but I delivered it from that power by holding it up.

That's what God does in Jesus Christ. He offers to save those who otherwise would fall to their destruction. Jesus Christ went to the lowest point so that He could lift

you up. You are not like an inanimate crystal vase. You can call out to God, even as you are conscious of the power of sinful desires, shameful lusts, and a depraved mind over you. You can ask Him to save you.

You do not have the power to separate yourself from either the guilt or the power of your sin, but Jesus Christ is able to make that separation for you. That is why He went to the cross. It is through His blood that those who come to Him are brought into a right relationship with God, and it is in this way that we are saved from God's wrath (Romans 5:9).

"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Our sin has been condemned in Him, and dealt with at the cross. The object of the Father's love became the object of His wrath because the objects of His wrath were also the objects of His love. The storm of God's wrath broke on Jesus, and when it was over, the way was opened for the godless and the wicked to return to God and be delivered from His wrath.

UNLOCKED

God's wrath is the response of His holiness and His love to evil. It is not in God's nature to be angry, but His anger is provoked by the godlessness and wickedness of men and women who suppress the truth that God has clearly revealed. God expresses His wrath by giving people up to their own choice with the result that they become bound by the power of sinful desires, shameful lusts, and a depraved mind.

But God has sent His Son to deliver us from His wrath. When Christ died at Calvary, He endured the wrath of God for us. That is why He is able to save all who will come to Him from the wrath of God.

PAUSE FOR PRAYER

Almighty Father,

I bow before You in worship, grateful that You have the power and the will to destroy sin and evil forever. Thank You that You have not abandoned the world, and that You have sent Your Son, Jesus Christ, to deliver me from Your wrath. Thank You for all that He endured for me, on the cross.

Help me to take in this awesome demonstration of Your love. Fill my heart with love for You and keep me from wickedness. Hasten the day when sin will be no more, through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

Note

1. Stuart Briscoe, *Romans*, vol. 1 of *The Communicator's Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1982), 40.



2

Propitiation

ROMANS 3

*Why do
Christians believe
that salvation
can come
only through
Jesus Christ?*

2 Propitiation

ROMANS 3



DISCOVER

why four of every five Americans don't understand sin.



LEARN

why it was necessary for Jesus to die on the cross.



WORSHIP

because Jesus' sacrifice satisfies God the Father.

OF all the questions I've been asked in more than twenty years as a pastor, there is one that comes up more than any other: "Why are evangelical Christians so insistent that Jesus Christ is the only way?"

People don't find it difficult to understand that we believe in Jesus, but they often struggle to understand why we want to persuade everybody else to believe our way. In a world of many diverse cultures, the claim that Jesus is "the way and the truth and the life" and that "no one comes to the Father except through [Him]" (John 14:6) seems arrogant, intolerant, and offensive.

Christians need to be sensitive to this charge, because it is easy to display an arrogant spirit toward those who do not believe and to present the truth in an obnoxious way. God commands us to speak with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). The message of Christ must be communicated in the Spirit of Christ.

But we must be prepared to give an answer, and that is the purpose of this chapter. There are good reasons for believing not just that Jesus is the only way, but that there could not possibly be any other way in which reconciliation with God could be achieved. Christians believe this not because we think that we are better than others, but because Jesus has done something that nobody else has done or ever could do.

GOING UNDER

Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. (ROMANS 3:9)

Have you ever had one of those days when you worked flat out all day, and at the end, the pile of work to be tackled was greater than when you started? It seemed as if the pressures were weighing in on you, piling up and closing over you, and you did not feel that you had the ability to rise above it. You began to feel overwhelmed, and eventually you might have even felt that you were “going under.”

That’s the picture Paul was using here. In effect, he was saying, “It makes no difference whether you are a Jew or a Gentile. We are all alike under sin.” It is worth pondering the word “all.” It crosses cultural barriers. Scots, Swedes, Norwegians, Poles, Croats, and Texans are all “under sin.” It also crosses generations. Boomers, busters, Generation Xers, and even members of the “Greatest Generation” that served in World War II and to whom the rest of us owe much “are all alike under sin.” The “all” includes people who are single, married, separated, divorced, and widowed. It embraces people at every point on the economic spectrum, from the poorer peasants in Mongolia to the richest executives in Manhattan. It includes you and me.

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law. (v. 19, EMPHASIS ADDED)

Not only are we all “under sin,” but Paul also spoke about people who are “under the law.” Sin is breaking the Law of God. This is God’s world. He is our Creator and our owner, and He writes the rules. Sin is breaking the rules that God has written.

This is important because even though Paul said that all are “under sin,” the vast majority of people do not think that this is true of them. It’s rather like driving. Most of us think that we are better than average, which of course is logically impossible!

WHO MAKES THE RULES?

In a survey published in the early 1990s, Americans were asked questions about personal values and morality. Only 17 percent defined *sin* as a violation of God’s will.¹ That means that 83 percent of those interviewed—four of every five citizens in the survey—did not understand what sin is. They grasped that sin is doing something “wrong,” but did not understand that it is doing something wrong as *defined by God*.

If each of us were free to make our own definition of right and wrong, life would be a lot easier! If it were up to me to define *sin*, I would omit the sins to which I am

most prone. I love the story of the man who went out to try archery for the first time, and then returned claiming that he had hit the center of the target with every shot.

“How do you do that?” his friends asked.

“It’s easy. I just shoot the arrow and then I go to the tree and paint circles around it!”

The man may come home with a warm feeling that he is absolutely on target, but he is living in a fool’s paradise!

We are under the Law, and that means that God paints the target. “Shoot at this,” He says: “You shall have no other gods before me. . . . Do not covet. . . . Be holy, because I am holy.” God is the lawgiver; He defines right and wrong. We are under His laws, and sin is breaking His commandments. At its heart, sin is a personal offense against God.

THE LAW . . . AND THE LAWBREAKERS

The Siren and the Sign

Some people have such a negative view of God’s Law that they tune out almost as soon as the word *law* is mentioned. But God’s Law is good, and it is a gracious act of God to give it to us.

Picture yourself driving along a country road on a fine day. It is a wide road, and you are in an open top convertible having the time of your life, driving safely at fifty miles an hour.

Suddenly you hear a siren and see the flashing lights, so you pull over to the side of the road. A police officer comes over and writes out a ticket for speeding.

“How on earth could I have been speeding?” you ask. “I was only doing fifty miles an hour in the open country!”

“Exactly,” says the officer, “you were twenty miles an hour over the speed limit. It’s thirty here.”

“Well, that is ridiculous,” you say. “How can the speed limit be thirty miles an hour on the open country road?”

The officer produces some minutes from a local village transportation department meeting and shows it to you. “It’s quite clear,” he says. “The village authorities are especially concerned about this section of road, so it’s thirty miles per hour.”

“Well, why is there not a sign?” you say in exasperation. “I don’t live around here, so how am I supposed to know?”

“Oh, we don’t like signs in this community,” says the officer. “They appear legalistic. Besides, they are ugly and unattractive, so we just leave the road open and then when people like you come around at fifty miles an hour, we book ’em!”

Believe it: The Law is the *gracious* provision of God, because it tells us exactly where we are. The Law tells us that we are “under sin.” That is not good news, but at least it puts us in touch with the reality of our condition. Without that, there is no hope.

A Fish out of Water

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. (v. 19)

The Law tells us that we are sinners, but does that really matter? After all, nobody is perfect, and everybody makes mistakes. “To err is human, to forgive is divine,” the saying goes, and if it’s natural for us to fail and natural for God to forgive, why should Christians make such a big deal about this? Isn’t it obvious God will forgive our sins?

The answer is that it is not obvious at all. The natural consequence of crime is not forgiveness but punishment, and the natural consequence of sin is not that God should forgive us but that He should condemn us.

God is holy. He abhors sin and has a settled disposition of unrelenting hostility toward sin wherever it is found. It is God’s unflinching purpose to eradicate sin from His universe. He will destroy it forever. So the fact that we are “under sin” matters big time!

It is hard for us to understand the holiness of God because we are not holy. It is like asking a fish to comprehend life outside of water. When a fish is taken out of the water, its mouth begins to open, its eyes glaze over, and before long it is dead. It cannot survive in the new environment.

That is what it is like when even the best of men are taken out of their normal environment and exposed directly to the awesome holiness of God. Isaiah was the finest preacher and moral leader of his day, but when he saw the holiness of God, he said, “I am ruined!” (Isaiah 6:5). The apostle John was known as the disciple whom Jesus loved. He had reclined next to Him at the Last Supper, but when he saw the unveiled holiness of the Lord, he wrote, “I fell at his feet as though dead” (Revelation 1:17). If Isaiah and John reacted that way, what would it be like for you and me?

Sinners cannot live in the white heat of God's holiness. When we stand in the presence of holiness, we will be silent. All the excuses and justifications that come so easily now will dry up in our mouths. Nobody will have anything to say.

This is the problem that God addresses in the Bible. If we don't understand the problem, we won't be able to grasp the solution. We are under sin and accountable to God. The universal sinfulness of man and the absolute holiness of God mean that condemnation, not forgiveness, would be our natural destiny. That is why God took a breathtaking initiative of mercy and grace.

TIME TO PAY UP

Keeping Up the Payments

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. (v. 21)

God is doing something to make our wrong position right, and this "righteousness" or "way of being right" is "apart from law." In other words, it is not a matter of God saying, "Mend your ways, get your act together, and shape up to My laws." That would be an unbearable burden, because we do not have the ability to obey the laws of God as we ought.

But notice that though this way of being right with God is "apart from law," it was also anticipated by the Law. The Law and the Prophets "testify to it," or point toward it. Christ is not an alternative to the Law; He is the fulfillment of the Law. The Law was never intended to be a ladder to heaven. God gave it to show us that we need a ladder to heaven.

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (vv. 22–24)

We will consider the word *justification* in the next chapter, but first, it is important to understand the ground on which this wonderful gift is offered to us. Whatever our background—Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, young or old, morally upright or utterly decadent—we are all sinners. And the one way in which sinners can come into a right relationship with a holy God is on the basis of redemption.

Redemption means erasing a debt by the payment of a price. The word was often used in the ancient world in connection with slaves. If a person went bankrupt, he

or she could pay off the debts by selling oneself and giving service as a slave. A slave could be “redeemed” if someone paid off the debt that he owed.

The same was true of property. If a family went bankrupt, they would put their property up for sale and hope to find a relative who would buy it so that their debt would be paid and the property would remain in the family.

Picking Up the Bill

Suppose a woman is paying a heavy mortgage on her home and, through a change in her circumstances, is no longer able to meet the payments. In fact, her income is not sufficient to pay even the interest on the loan. After a few months, she is far behind on her payments and has no way to service the debt. As time passes the debt rises, and there is no prospect of that changing. The woman is “going under.”

Now suppose that a friend offers to pay the woman’s debt. The friend writes a check to pay the arrears and places a standing order to service the debt for the lifetime of the loan. The friend would have acted as a redeemer.

The cost to the friend is exactly the same as the amount of the debt. The friend pays what the woman owes, dollar for dollar. If you could watch the monthly transactions as money moves from the friend’s bank account to the woman’s mortgage account, you would see exactly the same amount debited from the one and credited to the other.

Paul has been explaining that we are “under sin.” We are not tracking with the payments of obedience that we owe to God, and we have no hope of doing so. We are going under. But the Bible tells us about a truly remarkable friend.

Jesus Christ came to pay our debt to God. He offers to not just pay our arrears and bring us up to date on the payments, but also to service the lifetime of the loan. This incredible benefit to us came at an awesome cost to Christ. To pay the debt of sin, He had to assume the price of sin, and that is why He died on the cross. “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

Christ erased our debt by assuming it Himself, and through His death on our behalf, He released the full value of His righteousness to all His friends. It is in this way that we are released from the burden of our unpayable debt to God. Christians do not claim that they are without sin, but we thank God that our sin has been paid for by Jesus Christ our Savior, Redeemer, and Friend.

THE NIGHT OF THE PARTY

God displayed publicly [Jesus] as a propitiation in His blood through faith. (3:25 NASB)

Paul used a second word that takes us to the heart of the Christian faith, *propitiation*. A propitiation is a gift or payment that is offered to placate the anger of an offended person.

The best way to explain is through an illustration, so let me introduce you to Neil and Sally. Neil was in his early twenties when he began dating Sally, an attractive girl whom he met at the office. After a few months, Sally introduced Neil to her parents. It did not go well. Sally's parents didn't trust Neil, and there was frostiness in the air whenever he was around.

Their hesitation about Neil was understandable. Neil had a reputation for being "a bit on the wild side." In fact, there were times when even Sally was uncomfortable with him.

One night, Neil took Sally to a party where things got a little out of hand. Neil began drinking, and by the time they drove home in the early hours of the morning, he was scarcely able to control the car. Neil drove in a blurry haze, until the unthinkable happened. The car hit a bank, careened out of control, and rolled over several times; when the vehicle came to rest, both Neil and Sally were unconscious.

Some hours later, Neil came around in the hospital. His head was thumping and his body ached as he tried to remember what happened.

"How is Sally?" he asked.

"It's bad news," said the doctor. "She's paralyzed: She won't ever walk again."

"Can I see her?"

"No, she will not talk to you."

Suddenly Neil was in a walking nightmare. It wasn't long before he received a letter from Sally's family lawyer; Sally was bringing a legal action in the light of her permanent disability.

Sally says she never wants to see Neil again, and her father says that if he ever gets his hands on Neil, he will kill him. Neil wouldn't be surprised if he did.

Neil lies in the hospital wondering how he could have been such a fool, and how one simple action could have landed him in a situation with such desperate long-term

consequences. It was just one night, but it changed everything. Neil wonders how he can live with himself, and he has no idea what to do about Sally.

SATISFYING SALLY

There are three factors in this situation:

1. There is an offense. Neil acted recklessly and irresponsibly when he decided to drive home after drinking.
2. There is an offended person. Sally is angry, and rightly so.
3. There is an offender. Neil knows he is to blame. He is deeply sorry for what he has done, but that won't change the fact that Sally is paralyzed or the fact that her lawyers are preparing a legal action against him.

Neil hires a lawyer, and his lawyer talks with Sally's lawyer about what it would take to settle the case. Their discussion centers on one issue: What will it take to satisfy Sally?

The point at issue is not what Neil thinks is appropriate. Neil may feel that Sally's demands are unreasonable. He may point out that he is truly sorry. But the key question that the lawyers are discussing has nothing to do with Neil at all. It's all about Sally, because she is the offended party.

Neil has to find a way to satisfy Sally, or he will stand before the judge in court. The issue has nothing to do with whether he is sorry. The single question on which he must focus his attention is, "What will satisfy Sally?"

A propitiation is offered to . . . satisfy the need for justice.

Suppose that the lawyers identify a sum of money that would be acceptable to Sally, and that sum of money is paid. The payment of that money would be "a propitiation."

A propitiation is offered to an offended person to placate the anger of the injured party and satisfy the need for justice so that the case is settled and cannot be raised in a court of law again.

SATISFYING GOD

Our sin is, as we have seen, an offense against God. It follows that God is the one who determines what the propitiation should be. We may have all kinds of ideas about what we think is appropriate, but they are completely irrelevant. We may be truly sorry for what we have done, and that would be a good thing, but the central

issue has nothing to do with our repentance. The question is, “What will satisfy God?” Everything hangs on that question.

The Bible gives us the staggering answer. “God displayed publicly [Jesus] as a propitiation in His blood through faith” (v. 25 NASB).

God the Father presents His Son, Jesus Christ, to you. He introduces Jesus and tells you that He is the propitiation. The sacrifice of His death on the cross satisfies God and placates His wrath toward our sin.

God bore the
wrath of God.

Notice that God the Father presents Jesus to us. Both the Father and the Son are involved in dealing with our sin and settling our case. The Father loved the world and that is why He gave His Son. The death of Jesus is the demonstration of God’s love for us. We often think about what it cost Jesus to give His life on the cross, but what did it cost the Father to give His one and only Son for us?

There are no adequate analogies for this most profound mystery. The God whose holiness we have offended, whose laws we have broken, whose world we have spoiled, and whose wrath we have incurred, sent His one and only Son. God Himself became a man in the person of Jesus Christ, and God bore the wrath of God. God’s justice and God’s love meet at the cross as God pays the price that God requires. Through the death of Jesus, God’s anger has been placated, His justice satisfied, and in absolute justice, Holiness has reached out to grasp the hand of sinners.

ONE GLORIOUS WAY

We are now in a position to return to the question with which we began this chapter: Why do Christians insist that Jesus is the only way?

The answer is that God has presented Him as the propitiation. And if God has determined that the death of Jesus is the ground on which we may be redeemed and brought back into a right relationship with Him, what other ground can there be?

Who else would be in a position to pay our debt, or offer the sacrifice acceptable to God? If God presented Him as a sacrifice of atonement, what reason is there to think that any other sacrifice would be acceptable?

God reaches out to all men and women in every culture and points us to Jesus saying, “This is My Son! He is the propitiation. Put your faith in His blood!” As the hymn writer noted,

*There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin
He only, could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in.²*

And when you put your faith in His blood, you are no longer under condemnation. Christ is your propitiation. God has accepted His sacrifice. Justice has been done on your behalf through His shed blood. You will never see the wrath of God. In Christ, you have been set free to live a new life for the glory of God.

UNLOCKED

God's Law reveals that we are all sinners and that we are accountable to God for our sins. This means that it would be impossible for us to stand in the presence of a holy God. When an offense is committed against an individual, it is the offended party who must determine an appropriate settlement. Sin is an offense against God, and so it is for God to determine the propitiation for our sins.

In His death, Jesus redeemed us, and He propitiated (i.e., satisfied) God the Father.

Redemption speaks about what the death of Jesus accomplished for us. *Propitiation* speaks about what Jesus achieved in His death with reference to God. It is precisely because He propitiated the Father that Christ is able to redeem us.

PAUSE FOR PRAYER

Gracious Father,

Thank You for presenting Your Son, Jesus, as the propitiation for my sins. Thank You that through His death, He has paid my debt and freed me from condemnation.

Thank You that You have demonstrated Your everlasting love in sending Your Son for me. Gladly, I embrace Him by faith and offer You the worship and thanksgiving of my heart, through Jesus' name. Amen.

Notes

1. James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1991), 205. An additional 11 percent defined *sin* as breaking the Ten Commandments, but this has to be placed alongside the alarming fact that only 13 percent of those surveyed believed in all Ten Commandments. Evidently, 87 percent of Americans choose which commandments to believe, which is another way of saying that we write our own rules rather than submit to God's.

2. Cecil Frances Alexander, "There Is a Green Hill Far Away," verse 4.