

Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians
(5) How to Know You Are One of God's Elect (part 3)

Introduction:

Last Lord's Day we were addressing what Paul declared regarding the Christians in the church at Thessalonica. Paul was confident that they were among the elect of God, those whom God the Father had chosen in eternity, whom He would redeem from their sin through Jesus Christ. We considered Paul's reasons that had convinced him of their blessed spiritual state. We did so in order to establish a firm basis for assessing our own condition, whether each one of us could know with certainty that we are also numbered among the elect. We are commanded in Scripture to "give all diligence" to assess ourselves regarding this matter. Peter wrote in 2 Peter 1:10, "Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if you do these things, you shall never fall." And as we stated last week, this command is not so that we might become one of God's elect, for that is not possible. The elect is a finite number of fallen men, women, and children whom God the Father chose from eternity, ones that He determined He would save from their sins through Jesus Christ. No, to make one's calling and election sure is not in order to become one of God's elect; rather, it is to determine if God had numbered us among His elect.

I. Six reasons Paul believed the Christians in this church were among God's elect.

Paul gave six reasons that convinced him that they were the objects of God's sovereign grace. These are contained in verses 5 through 10 of this chapter. They include the following:

1. Paul was convinced of their election by God *because of the manner in which the gospel had been at work among them*. In **verse 5** Paul wrote, "because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction."

2. Paul knew of their election by God *because of the manifestation of the Word of God proclaimed to them--it had resulted in their changed lives*. In **verse 6** Paul wrote, "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit."

3. Similarly, Paul knew of their election by God *because they became examples of how believers ought to live in the world*. In **verse 7** Paul wrote, "so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia."

4. Paul knew of their election by God *because they proclaimed the Word of God to others, seeking to evangelize the world in which God had placed them*. In **verse 8** Paul wrote, "For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything."

5. Paul knew of their election by God *because of their repentance from sin to serve the true God*. Paul wrote in **verse 9**, "For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God."

Now in our notes last week we explained the nature of true repentance. However, due to the time, we skipped over this. It would be good for us to go over this very important matter today before we proceed in our study of this epistle.

Why is this important for us? For one reason, there is much misunderstanding about the nature of true repentance. There are many false professors of Christianity, ones who think that they have salvation, but do not. They claim that they have truly repented of their sins, but their repentance is a false repentance. I have given this quotation of **Charles Spurgeon** before, but it is a good one.

We shall now turn to a second point. IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT THERE ARE FALSE PROFESSORS (i.e. professing believers). There is an imitation of the externals of godliness, which it is not easy to detect. Art can carve a statue so that it almost breathes; and some of us in looking at very skillful paintings have mistaken them for realities. In a notable picture in the Exhibition, you may have noticed an imitation of sunlight shining under a door, so well effected, that many go up to it to ascertain if it be not really a gleam from the sun. We know that men can counterfeit coins and notes so well, that only the most experienced can detect them; and in all commercial transactions men are so well aware of the subtlety of their fellows, that they look well lest they be deceived. The vital mysteries of godliness are mysterious: the inner life cannot be perceived by the carnal eye, and the outer life of the godly seemeth to most men to be but morality carried out with care; and hence it becomes but a very simple task for a man to make himself look just like a Christian, so as to deceive the very elect. To learn by heart that which others may say from the heart--to get the outline of a believer's experience, and then to adapt it skillfully to one's self as our experience--this is a thing so simple, that instead of wondering that there are hypocrites, I often marvel that there are not ten times more! And then, again, the graces--the real graces within--are very easy to counterfeit. There is a repentance that needeth to be repented of--and yet it approaches near as possible to true repentance (cf. 2 Cor. 7:10, KJV). Does repentance make men hate sin? They who have a false repentance may detest some crimes. Does repentance make men resolve that they will not sin? So will this false repentance; for Balaam said, "If Barak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I will not go beyond the word of the Lord." Does true repentance make men humble themselves? So does false repentance, for Ahab humbled himself before God, and yet he perished. There is a line of distinction so fine, that an eagle's eye hath not seen it, and only God Himself, and the soul which is enlightened with His Spirit, can tell whether the repentance be genuine or no. And as for faith, how easy is it to counterfeit this! Even in Christ's day, there was a faith which wrought miracles but did not save the soul; and Paul tells us that if we had a faith which could remove mountains, yet if we had not charity, it would profit us nothing. I know it, that a man may say that he is saved by faith without works; and his faith may give him comfort, his faith help him in trials, it may make him forsake some sins, and yet it may not be the faith which looks alone to Christ, and saves the soul. To imitate these things, to so cunning and well-practiced a counterfeiter as Satan, is no great difficulty.¹

What is true repentance? Repentance, simply, is fully *turning oneself from serving sin to submitting to God and doing His will*. And yet having described repentance simply, further clarification is needed for, again, there is a false repentance that does not save which can look much like the genuine item. True repentance includes the following elements.

(1) With true repentance there is a true sense and acknowledgement of *personal sin*. Often times when evangelism is conducted this is not a matter that is driven home to the conscience. It is not enough to get a person to acknowledge that he is a sinner among everyone else who are also sinners. Most people will readily agree with this. But true repentance is personal. The one who repents sees himself as the guilty sinner whom must be set free from sin. He knows the issue is with "*Me, My sin, oh Lord.*"

(2) With true repentance there is a sense of one's *guilt because of his sin*. That is, when a man repents of his sin, he feels the just condemnation of God upon himself for his sin. He does not see his sin as

¹ From Spurgeon's sermon, "*Self-Delusion*", which is posted on our website at http://www.thewordoftruth.net/classic_sermons/Spurgeon_1_Final.html

a little matter, but as a terrible affront to God's law that warrants his condemnation; his sin is an exceeding crime that is worthy of God's wrath. He sees his sin as exceedingly sinful and he recognizes there is no basis of plea before God for forgiveness; rather, if forgiveness is to come to him, he knows that it must be by the free and voluntary exercise of God's mercy that God is free to bestow or withhold.

(3) With true repentance there is a sense of *shame* due to one's sin. Shame is different from guilt. Guilt is a sense of one's condemnation. Shame is the feeling of utter disgrace due to sin. There are some who teach that you are never to experience shame or guilt, that God in His grace has provided such a perfect sacrifice in Christ that guilt and shame are never to be experienced, and that if a preacher leads people to experience guilt and shame over sin, he is a false teacher. But we would argue that if you have not experienced a sense of guilt--just condemnation-- and a sense of shame concerning your sin, you have not received forgiveness of sin. If our sin caused Christ to be treated as guilty and caused Him to suffer shame, it should certainly do that in us. Adam and Eve sensed great shame in the nakedness of their sin, and we should feel no less. A shameless man is a non-Christian man.

(4) With true repentance there is a *sorrow* over personal sin. It is inward sorrow, a remorse for having ever committed it. This is in contrast to a sorrow or fear merely for its consequences. Parents, when your child sins and he is sorrowful before you, that is good, but that is not enough. Direct him to have sorrow before God. And be concerned and make it a matter of prayer, if that is not present.

This sorrow is not simply a sorrow for having committed the sin itself, but *it is sorrow before God*. When one becomes aware of sin and God's attitude toward sin and His work through Christ in dealing with sin, the repentant sinner feels great sorrow. Not only has his sin deeply grieved God, but his sin was a cause of Christ's terrible shame and infinite suffering as the sin-bearer. There is sorrow for having committed it, but it is a sorrow that involves remorse for the pain it placed upon the Lord Jesus, Who bore it upon His cross.

(5) With true repentance there is a *desire and effort toward restitution*. This is the effort to undo the offense before others, making restitution if need be, to vindicate the ways of God and bring Him glory. This was evident in the repentance of Zacchaeus. He said, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold." For many of our past sins restitution is not possible, but where harm or loss that we have caused to others can be corrected, the repentant believer in Jesus Christ seeks to do so.

(6) With true repentance there is *confession of sin*. There is an owning of personal responsibility for one's sin. When one truly repents he makes no excuses. He does not lessen his guilt; rather, if it were possible (but it isn't), he would magnify his guilt. Again, Zacchaeus could be cited. He stood and confessed his sins to Christ but it was in the hearing of others. When John baptized in the Jordan he did so while they were confessing their sins.

(7) With true repentance there is a *confession of specific sin*. Yes, there is a keen recognition of the pervasiveness of sin in one's entire being, but it is generally specific offences which makes the matter sin known to the individual. These specific offences are recognized and acknowledged, which leads one to see the all pervasiveness of sin as a principle in one's being; and seeing this, he turns from it.

(8) With true repentance there is a *hatred of sin in all its forms wherever it is detected*. The non-Christian may grieve over certain "sins", but these are generally outside of themselves. They hate "sins" which run counter their understanding of what is right and wrong--things they may identify as crimes against the environment, sins of intolerance, prejudice. But generally these are sins outside of themselves. With respect to themselves all behavior and attitudes are justified and they justify others who view matters in the same way. But when one becomes a Christian, having repented of sin, he adopts the same view of sin that God has--he has a hatred of it. He hates it in *himself* and he hates it in *others*. He grieves over what he does; he grieves over what others do.

This is important. There is something defective somewhere if we do not hate sin. If we are not grieved by immorality in all its forms, if an overheard blasphemy does not cut us to the heart, if an off-color joke does not offend our sensibilities but rather appeals to our sense of humor. The Lord hates sin with a perfect hatred. May He enable us to do so as well.

(9) With true repentance there is a cessation--a turning-- from the performing of those former sins. Now this is not the time to speak of sins of which we repent of which seem to come back upon us, sins to which we frequently succumb; that is another topic for another time. What we are saying here is that when one repents of sin, he deals with sin, it is not merely a confession of it without the intention or resolve to turn from it.

(10) With true repentance there is a turning to God and His Son Jesus Christ. Repentance is not just turning from sin, but it is turning to God. In fact, the Apostle Paul emphasized this aspect when he described his ministry.

“I shrank not from declaring unto you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly, and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Acts 20:20)

Now before we move on from this description of *true repentance*, I think it is important to stress this: although all of the elements stated above must be present when true repentance has been experienced, the degree to which these things may be experienced varies greatly from individual to individual. Some feel these things very acutely, so as to be almost consumed by them; others, however, do not experience them as acutely; nevertheless, they are all present. The bottom line is this, not that you have felt these things acutely but that the essence of repentance has been exercised by yourself--that is, *you have turned from serving sin and are you are now submitted to God and doing His will from the heart.*

Now the sixth reason that had convinced Paul that these Christians were among God’s elect was this:

6. Paul knew of their election by God *because they were joyfully anticipating the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.* In 1 Thessalonians 1:10 Paul wrote, *“and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”* True Christians look forward to the return of the Lord Jesus when they will receive the fullness of their salvation that He has secured and promised to them. They view themselves as strangers in this world, and they long for the new heavens and new earth that the Lord has prepared for them.

Let us say a few words about this statement in **1 Thessalonians 1:10**, “the wrath to come.”

II. The Wrath to Come (1 Thess. 1:10)

Again, Paul described these Christians as ones who *“wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”* First, let us acknowledge that The Holy Scriptures teach very plainly and frequently of...

A. The wrath of God

When we speak of the wrath to come, we are, of course, referring to God’s wrath. The idea of the wrath of God is not one that many find to be pleasant, and some would even say, polite. Even Christians will be heard to make apologies to those who speak ill of our God because of the manner in which the wrath of God is taught and recorded in Holy Scripture. Here are a few words of **Arthur Pink** on this matter:

It is sad to find so many professing Christians who appear to regard the wrath of God as something for which they need to make an apology, or at least they wish there were no such thing. While some would not go so far as to openly admit that they consider it a blemish on the Divine character, yet they are far from regarding it with delight, they like not to think about it, and they rarely hear it mentioned without a secret resentment rising up in their hearts against it. Even with those who are more sober in their judgment, not a few seem to imagine that there is a severity about the Divine wrath which is too terrifying to form a theme for profitable contemplation. Others harbor the delusion that God's wrath is not consistent with His goodness, and so seek to banish it from their thoughts.

Yes, many there are who turn away from a vision of God's wrath as though they were called to look upon some blotch in the Divine character, or some blot upon the Divine government. But what saith the Scriptures? As we turn to them we find that God has made no attempt to conceal the fact of His wrath. He is not ashamed to make it known that vengeance and fury belong unto Him. His own challenge is, "See now that I, even I, am He, and there is no god with Me: I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal; neither is there any that can deliver out of My hand. For I lift up My hand to heaven, and say, I live forever. If I whet My glittering sword, and Mine hand take hold on judgment; I will render vengeance to Mine enemies, and will reward them that hate Me" (Deuteronomy 32:39-41). A study of the concordance will show that there are more references in Scripture to the anger, fury, and wrath of God, than there are to His love and tenderness. Because God is holy, He hates all sin; and because He hates all sin, His anger burns against the sinner: Psalm 7:11.

What is God's wrath? It is the manifestation of His perfect attributes. The wrath of God is His holy anger and hatred for sin. It is the revelation of His displeasure and indignation of all that is contrary to His nature and opposed to His rule. His wrath is so intense and so unquenchable, that it is set forth in Scripture as the just punishment for sinners in eternal hell. Here are the words of **J. I. Packer** that speak to this:

The New Testament views hell (*Gehenna*, as Jesus calls it, the place of incineration, Matthew 5:22; 18:9) as the final abode of those consigned to eternal punishment at the Last Judgment (Matt. 25:41-46; Rev. 20:11-15). It is thought of as a place of fire and darkness (Jude 7, 13), of weeping and grinding of teeth (Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30), of destruction (2 Thess. 1:7-9; 2 Peter 3:7; 1 Thess. 5:3), and of torment (Rev. 20:10; Luke 16:23)--in other words, of total distress and misery. If, as it seems, these terms are symbolic rather than literal (fire and darkness would be mutually exclusive in literal terms), we may be sure that the reality, which is beyond our imagining, exceeds the symbol of dreadfulness. New Testament teaching about hell is meant to appall us and strike us dumb with horror, assuring us that, as heaven will be better than we could dream, so hell will be worse than we can conceive.²

When we speak of Christians, who "*wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come*", we are speaking of those who have believed that Jesus Christ has delivered His people from God's punishment upon sinners in eternal hell. Now we have been speaking of God's elect, those whom God *chose* from eternity to escape His judgment, receiving freely from Him mercy and grace through Jesus Christ. But as we have said in the past, it is wrong for those to assume that we mean by teaching of election that God also elects, or chooses, people to go to hell. People who end up in hell do so because they choose to do so. They sin against a good and merciful God who has been longsuffering toward them, but has been ignored or rebuffed by them. People will go to hell because *they* have chosen to go there, not because God has made that decision for them.³ Here again, we may consider the words of **J. I. Packer**:

² J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Tyndale House Publishers, 1993), pp. 261f.

³ Now certainly God has decreed from all eternity all things that come to pass in history, but this does not negate human responsibility. People who will be in heaven will be so solely due to the mercy and grace of God. People who will be in hell will be so due to their own sin and refusal to receive the free offer of forgiveness of sins in the gospel.

Scripture sees hell as self-chosen; those in hell will realize that they sentenced themselves to it by loving darkness rather than light, choosing not to have their Creator as their Lord, preferring self-indulgent sin to self-denying righteousness, and (if they encountered the gospel) rejecting Jesus rather than coming to Him (John 3:18-21; Rom. 1:18, 24, 26, 28, 32; 2:8; 2 Thess. 2:9-11). General revelation confronts all mankind with this issue, and from this standpoint hell appears as God's gesture of respect for human choice. All receive what they actually chose, either to be with God forever, worshipping Him, or without God forever, worshipping themselves. Those who are in hell will know not only that for their doings they deserve it but also that in their hearts they chose it.⁴

And I think that this may be the greatest of torments of the damned: a sense of great regret for their folly and failure to receive freely what was offered to them in the gospel.

B. There is an appointed day in which the wrath of God will be unleashed upon all who are damned in their sins. The apostle wrote of "the wrath to come." God has appointed a Day in which He will judge the world by Jesus Christ, at which time salvation will be granted to those who believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ, and damnation will be the fate of all who live and die in their sins. The apostle Paul had proclaimed this Day of Judgment before the pagan crowds of Athens. He declared,

"Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent,³¹ because *He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained.* He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead." (Acts 17:30f)

This is the great and final day of history that begins with the visible, physical, second coming of Jesus Christ. It is the final Day of the Lord of which the Scriptures speak frequently.

Now there are many manifestations of God's wrath in history, when God has administered His justice in the lives of people who live in rebellion to Him. Some of these great interventions of His judgment in history have foreshadowed and portended the great and final day of the Lord when Jesus Christ returns. The language depicting these historical judgments serve to instruct us about the nature and the certainty of that final day. For example, we read a prophecy in the Old Testament book of Zephaniah, in which God declared that He would bring his instrument of Babylon into the Promised Land in order to punish the people of Judah for their sin. But in the prophecy and description of that historic "Day of the Lord", we have a description and depiction of the final Day of the Lord at the end of history. Here are the words of **Zephaniah 1:14-18**.

¹⁴The great day of the LORD is near;
It is near and hastens quickly.
The noise of the day of the LORD is bitter;
There the mighty men shall cry out.

¹⁵That day is a day of wrath,
A day of trouble and distress,
A day of devastation and desolation,
A day of darkness and gloominess,
A day of clouds and thick darkness,

¹⁶A day of trumpet and alarm
Against the fortified cities
And against the high towers.

¹⁷"I will bring distress upon men,
And they shall walk like blind men,

⁴ Ibid, pp. 262f.

Because they have sinned against the LORD;
Their blood shall be poured out like dust,
And their flesh like refuse.”

¹⁸Neither their silver nor their gold
Shall be able to deliver them
In the day of the LORD’s wrath;
But the whole land shall be devoured
By the fire of His jealousy,
For He will make speedy riddance
Of all those who dwell in the land.

Now where **Zephaniah** prophesied of God’s wrath upon Judah *before* it occurred within history, God described through His prophet, **Ezekiel**, His judgment *after* it had occurred.

¹⁷The word of the LORD came to me, saying, ¹⁸“Son of man, the house of Israel has become dross to Me; they are all bronze, tin, iron, and lead, in the midst of a furnace; they have become dross from silver. ¹⁹Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Because you have all become dross, therefore behold, I will gather you into the midst of Jerusalem. ²⁰As men gather silver, bronze, iron, lead, and tin into the midst of a furnace, to blow fire on it, to melt it; so I will gather you in *My anger* and in *My fury*, and I will leave you there and melt you. ²¹Yes, I will gather you and blow on you with the fire of *My wrath*, and you shall be melted in its midst. ²²As silver is melted in the midst of a furnace, so shall you be melted in its midst; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have poured out *My fury* on you.”

²³And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ²⁴“Son of man, say to her: ‘You are a land that is not cleansed or rained on in *the day of indignation*.’ ²⁵The conspiracy of her prophets in her midst is like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have devoured people; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in her midst. ²⁶Her priests have violated My law and profaned My holy things; they have not distinguished between the holy and unholy, nor have they made known the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they have hidden their eyes from My Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them. ²⁷Her princes in her midst are like wolves tearing the prey, to shed blood, to destroy people, and to get dishonest gain. ²⁸Her prophets plastered them with untempered mortar, seeing false visions, and divining lies for them, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD,’ when the LORD had not spoken. ²⁹The people of the land have used oppressions, committed robbery, and mistreated the poor and needy; and they wrongfully oppress the stranger. ³⁰So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one. ³¹Therefore I have poured out *My indignation* on them; I have consumed them with the fire of *My wrath*; and I have recompensed their deeds on their own heads,” says the Lord GOD. (Ezek. 22:17-31)

God has appointed a day in which His wrath will be poured out upon all His enemies. And then, all those who are outside of Jesus Christ, will begin to suffer the eternal wrath of God upon them for their sins. Here is a description of what awaits fallen man, set forth by **Jonathan Edwards**, in a sermon delivered in 1735.

Wrath will come upon them without any restraint or moderation in the degree of it. God does always lay, as it were, a restraint upon himself. He does not stir up his wrath. He stays his rough wind in the day of his east wind. He lets not his arm settle down on wicked men with its full weight. But when sinners shall have filled up the measure of their sins, there will be no caution, no restraint. His rough wind will not be stayed nor moderated. The wrath of God will be poured out like fire. He will come forth, not only in anger, but in the fierceness of his anger; he will execute wrath with power, so as to show what his wrath is, and make his power known. There will be nothing to alleviate his wrath. His heavy wrath will lie on them, without anything to lighten the burden, or to keep off, in any measure, the full weight of it from pressing the soul. His eye will not spare, neither will he regard the sinner’s cries

and lamentations, however loud and bitter. Then shall wicked men know that God is the Lord. They shall know how great that majesty is which they have despised, and how dreadful that threatened wrath is which they have so little regarded. Then shall come on wicked men that punishment which they deserve. God will exact of them the uttermost farthing. Their iniquities are marked before him; they are all written in his book. And in the future world he will reckon with them, and they must pay all the debt.⁵

C. God also manifests His wrath within history upon people who commit sin.

Although God has intervened in remarkable ways in history, in which the Day of the Lord occurred upon people, God also manifests His judgment in the lives of individuals throughout their lives. Paul wrote of this in Romans 1.

¹⁸*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men*, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, ¹⁹because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. ²⁰For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, ²¹because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²²Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.

²⁴Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, ²⁵who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

²⁶For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. ²⁷Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.

²⁸And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; ²⁹being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, ³⁰backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, ³¹undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; ³²who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.

Paul stated that the wrath of God is being revealed in history “*against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.*” He made it clear that the form of God’s wrath that is seen in people’s lives is that the Lord turns people over to their sin, so that the result of His wrath is that they sin more and more egregiously. Sin is itself a manifestation of the wrath of God.

But the more people sin, the more they are storing up for themselves the wrath of God that will begin to be unleashed upon them on the final Day of Judgment. Paul wrote of this coming Day of Wrath in Romans 2:1ff. Here he wrote directly to moralists who thought that they were immune to God’s judgment.

Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. ²But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things. ³And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? ⁴Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? ⁵But in accordance with your hardness and your

⁵ Jonathan Edwards, “Wrath Upon the Wicked to the Uttermost”, a sermon delivered in 1735

impenitent heart *you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God*, ⁶who “will render to each one according to his deeds”: ⁷eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; ⁸but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, ⁹tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; ¹⁰but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹¹For there is no partiality with God.

God holds the damned in reserve for that Day when His wrath will be poured upon them. On that Day God will render to every human being His holy justice. There will be no excuses accepted. There will be no mercy granted on that Day outside of Jesus Christ.

But further, God has in his eternal decree set the limit to which every human being commits sin in his or her life, and when that set limit of sin is reached, that person’s life comes to an end. This is stated in the next chapter of 1 Thessalonians 2. We read of Paul writing to these Gentile Christians who had been persecuted by their countrymen just as the Jewish Christians had been persecuted by unbelieving Jews. Here we read of *the set limit of sins* to which God granted them:

¹⁴For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, ¹⁵who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, ¹⁶forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, *so as always to fill up the measure of their sins*; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost. (1 Thess. 2:14-16)

Jonathan Edwards spoke upon this in the sermon cited above. He followed the common Puritan manner of sermonizing. He first gave an exposition of his text, which was 1 Thessalonians 2:16, and then he stated the doctrine of the passage. This was followed by propositions he made based upon the doctrine of the passage.

DOCTRINE—When those that continue in sin shall have filled up the measure of their sin, then wrath will come upon them to the uttermost.

I. PROPOSITION. There is a certain measure that God has set to the sin of every wicked man. God says concerning the sin of man, as he says to the raging waves of the sea, Hitherto shall you come, and no further. The measure of some is much greater than of others. Some reprobates commit but a little sin in comparison with others, and so are to endure proportionably a smaller punishment. There are many vessels of wrath; but some are smaller and others greater vessels. Some will contain comparatively but little wrath, others a greater measure of it. Sometimes, when we see men go to dreadful lengths, and become very heinously wicked, we are ready to wonder that God lets them alone. He sees them go on in such audacious wickedness, and keeps silence, nor does anything to interrupt them, but they go smoothly on, and meet with no hurt. But sometimes the reason why God lets them alone is because they have not filled up the measure of their sins. When they live in dreadful wickedness, they are but filling up the measure which God has limited for them. This is sometimes why God allows very wicked men to live so long; because their iniquity is not full, Gen. 15:16, “The iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.” For this reason also God sometimes allows them to live in prosperity. Their prosperity is a snare to them, and an occasion of their sinning a great deal more. Wherefore God allows them to have such a snare, because he allows them to fill up a larger measure. So, for this cause, he sometimes allows them to live under great light, and great means and advantages, at the same time to neglect and misimprove all. Everyone shall live until he has filled up his measure.

II. PROPOSITION. While men continue in sin, they are filling the measure set them. This is the work in which they spend their whole lives. They begin in their childhood; and if they live to grow old in sin,

they still go on with this work. It is the work with which every day is filled up. They may alter their business in other respects. They may sometimes be about one thing and sometimes about another, but they never change from this work of filling up the measure of their sins. Whatever they put their hands to, they are still employed in this work. This is the first thing that they set themselves about when they awake in the morning, and the last thing they do at night. They are all the while treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath, and the revelation of the righteous judgment of God. It is a gross mistake of some natural men, who think that when they read and pray they do not add to their sins. But on the contrary, they think they diminish their guilt by these exercises. They think, that instead of adding to their sins, they do something to satisfy for their past offenses. But instead of that, they do but add to the measure by their best prayers, and by those services with which they themselves are most pleased.

III. PROPOSITION. When once the measure of their sins is filled up, then wrath will come upon them to the uttermost. God will then wait no longer upon them. Wicked men think that God is altogether such a one as themselves, because, when they commit such wickedness, he keeps silence. “Because judgment against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the children of men is fully set in them to do evil.” But when once they shall have filled up the measure of their sins, judgment will be executed; God will not bear with them any longer. Now is the day of grace, and the day of patience, which they spend in filling up their sins. But when their sins shall be full, then will come the day of wrath, the day of the fierce anger of God.—God often executes his wrath on ungodly men, in a less degree, in this world. He sometimes brings afflictions upon them, and that in wrath. Sometimes he expresses his wrath in very painful judgments. Sometimes he appears in a terrible manner, not only outwardly, but also in the inward expressions of it on their consciences. Some, before they died, have had the wrath of God inflicted on their souls in degrees that have been intolerable. But these things are only forerunners of their punishment, only slight foretastes of wrath. God never stirs up all his wrath against wicked men while in this world. But when once wicked men shall have filled up the measure of their sins, then wrath will come upon them to the uttermost

D. Jesus Christ alone delivers His people from the wrath to come.

The reason that Jesus is able to deliver His people from the wrath of God was because He bore the curse of God that was upon them for their sin. We read in Galatians 3:13, “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed *is* everyone who hangs on a tree”). Through His death upon the cross, Jesus bore the wrath of God that was upon His people. He bore the wrath of God for our sin, whereby he freed us from all condemnation. When that final Day of Judgment arrives, He will exonerate each and every one of His people from any condemnation, for He suffered the wrath of God in their place. They will stand uncondemned, for they will stand not in their own righteousness, but in His with which each of them is fully clothed. There is no condemnation for them who are in Christ Jesus, because He was condemned in our place. This enabled God to be just, and yet the Justifier of everyone who comes humbly trusting the Lord Jesus to save him from his sins.

Today is the day of opportunity. We are told to flee from the wrath to come. To where do we flee? We flee to Jesus Christ in faith, wholly trusting Him with our great need to be delivered from God’s wrath. As the Scriptures declare, “Now behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2). May the Lord not allow anyone of us to have “our way”, but that He would be merciful and drive us to Jesus Christ.

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 15:13)

Five Truths About the Wrath of God

Article by

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Guest Contributor to the Desiring God website

The doctrine of the wrath of God has fallen on hard times. In today's world, any concept of God's wrath upsets our modern sentiments. It's too disconcerting, too intolerant.

We live in a day where we have set ourselves as the judge and God's character is on trial. "How can hell be just?" "Why would God command the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites?" "Why does God always seem so angry?"

The fact that so many people struggle with these questions, and many more like them, means that more than ever right thinking is needed about the doctrine of God's wrath. It is needed for motivation for Christian living, fuel for proper worship, and as a toolbox to confront objections to Christianity.

Here are five biblical truths about the wrath of God:

1. God's wrath is just.

It has become common for many to argue that the God of the Old Testament is a moral monster that is by no means worthy of worship. However, biblical authors have no such problem. In fact, God's wrath is said to be in perfect accord with God's justice. Paul writes, "But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (Rom. 2:5). God's wrath, then, is in proportion to human sinfulness.

Similarly, Proverbs 24:12 says, "If you say, 'Behold, we did not know this,' does not he who weighs hearts perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it, and will he not repay man according to his work?"

J. I. Packer summarizes: "God's wrath in the Bible is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable, morally ignoble thing that human anger so often is. It is, instead, a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil" (Knowing God, 151).

2. God's wrath is to be feared.

God's wrath is to be feared because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). God's wrath is to be feared because we are justly condemned sinners apart from Christ (Rom. 5:1). God's wrath is to be feared because he is powerful enough to do what he promises (Jer. 32:17). God's wrath is to be feared because God promises eternal punishment apart from Christ (Matt. 25:46).

3. God's wrath is consistent in the Old and New Testament.

It is common to think of the Old Testament God as mean, harsh, and wrath-filled, and the God of the New Testament as kind, patient, and loving. Neither of these portraits are (sic—"is") representative of Scripture's teaching on the wrath of God. We find immensely fearful descriptions of the wrath of God in both the Old and the New Testament. Here are just a few examples: "Behold the storm of the LORD! Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest; it will burst upon the head of the wicked" (Jer. 30:23). "The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies" (Nahum 1:2). "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth" (Rom. 1:18). "From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty" (Rev. 19:15).

4. God's wrath *is* his love in action against sin.

This is counter-intuitive, but hear me out. God is love, and God does all things for his glory (Rom. 11:36). He loves his glory above all (and that is a good thing!). Therefore, God rules the world in such a way that brings himself maximum glory. This means that God must act justly and judge sin (i.e. respond with wrath), otherwise God would not be God. God's love for his glory motivates his wrath against sin. Admittedly, God's love for his own glory is a most sobering reality for many and not good news for sinners. It is after all, "a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God" (Heb. 10:31).

5. God's wrath is satisfied in Christ.

Here we have the ultimate good news: "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). Because of Christ, God can rightly call sinners justified (Rom. 3:26). God has done what we could not do, and he has done what we didn't deserve. Charles Wesley rightly exulted in this good news:

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died he for me? who caused his pain!
For me--who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?
