

The Heart of the Gospel

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Preacher: David Wesner

[0:00] Well, beginning with this week, we're entering into a new section in J.I. Packer's book, *Knowing God*, and the title of that section is *If God Before Us*.

! And just to give you a little review of the past four chapters, we have just covered *God the Judge*, *the Wrath of God*, *Goodness and Severity*, and *the Jealous God*.

And the chapter we're going to be considering this morning as the first chapter, the introduction into this new section of *God Before Us* is called *The Heart of the Gospel*.

And for those of you who are following along in the book, let me just say right off, the average chapter in this so far, as I kind of glanced through, is about six to ten pages. This chapter is 20. I pretty much had my lesson completed, I think at about page six.

And so there is much material there we will not be covering today, so I would encourage you to read it on your own. He has much good to say, much application to what the heart of the gospel is that we won't be able to cover today.

[1:08] Well, Packer begins by recounting a Greek war legend of around 1000 BC, and it involved an expeditionary force that was dispatched to recover Princess Helen, who had been taken to Troy.

And as the story goes, the general, when he was about halfway on the journey, the fleet was buffeted by winds and unable to make progress.

And so he's sent back to have his daughter ceremonially sacrificed in order to appease the gods.

And as the story goes, it would seem that it worked because the winds changed, they got favorable westerly winds, and the fleet made its way to their destination.

Pagan religions all over the world have been based on the idea of propitiation, the need to appease the gods in order to gain their favor, and it's often through human sacrifice.

As we turn to Judeo-Christian religions, there would seem to be a very similar concept. God is angry with man. Within Judaism, an entire sacrificial system exists to maintain favor with God.

[2:32] Ultimately, Christianity teaches that a human sacrifice was required to fully appease God. God is angry with God.

How would you respond? You're witnessing to somebody. We've just completed another witnessing class, and you present Jesus. You present the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and they come back to you with this idea that this is so barbaric.

You're so obsessed with blood. This is like the pagan religions, where you had to appease the gods by making human sacrifices. How would we respond? There.

There. There. Okay. The pagan sacrifices were continual, and Christ's sacrifice was once and for all. Maybe the pagans haven't just caught up enough yet.

Plain the devil's advocate. For in Judaism, we had continual sacrifices, didn't we? Jim? Excellent.

[4:00] So, Jim. Jim, those that didn't hear, said that in paganism, they had to provide their own sacrifices, their own human sacrifices. Often, it was a child.

Whereas, God provided the sacrifice for us. And I think we'll continue on with that thought. So, what is the difference? After restudying this chapter, I would summarize it in this way.

First, I would acknowledge to that person that, yes, our God is angry with us. He is angry personally with us. That is a truth. But secondly, we must recognize that his wrath is nothing like human wrath. It's not based on mood swings. It's not a self-centered kind of wrath. Rather, it flows from his righteous character. Packer, in quoting John Murray, summarizes, God's wrath is the holy revulsion of God's being against that which is the contradiction of his holiness.

It issues in a positive outgoing of the divine displeasure. He goes on, So far from the manifestation of God's wrath in punishing sin being morally doubtful, The thing that would be morally doubtful would be for him not to show his wrath in this way.

[5:23] The third thing I would point out is that the human sacrifice that appeased God's anger isn't remotely similar to the human sacrifice that God provided.

And it really summarizes what Jim just said. God propitiated his wrath against us by sacrificing his own divine son, rather than man sacrificing man to satisfy his fickle God.

So this morning, really, in a nutshell, that is the heart of the gospel. And so we're going to look at the heart of the gospel under three short statements.

First, God is angry with man. Secondly, God's wrath must be propitiated. And thirdly, God propitiated his wrath through his own son. Please turn to Romans 1.18.

Romans 1.18. As we look at, firstly, God is angry with man. We established that God is very angry with man several weeks ago when we considered Packer's chapter, The Wrath of God.

[6:36] This morning, I'd like to re-examine two aspects of God's wrath that are foundational to the gospel by asking two questions. First, why is God angry?

And second, with whom is God angry? Why is God angry? Well, Paul very quickly answered that question in this magnificent gospel presentation that he gave in his letter to the Romans.

Look at verse 18 of chapter 1. The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

Very simply, God is angry with man because of sin. What is sin? Going one's own way rather than God's way. Failure to meet God's righteous standards, which are summarized in his law.

Again, those that just completed the witnessing class. Remember 1 John 3, 4. Everyone who sins breaks the law. In fact, sin is lawlessness. And this logically leads to the second aspect of God's anger.

[7:45] God isn't just generally upset. He's personally upset because of our personal sins against him. So with whom is God angry? Look at chapter 2, verse 5 of Romans.

Chapter 2, verse 5. 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.

God is angry with individual sinners because of their personal sin against them, against him. I wonder, how often do we really keep the heart of the gospel at the heart of the gospel?

We shouldn't always present the gospel with a 2x4 across the side of the head. However, as I've reviewed my own witnessing history, I can't ever recall when presenting the gospel to somebody, presenting a verse such as Romans 2, 5.

Is God's righteous judgment really something to be feared? Well, Jesus summarized it best in Matthew 10, 28. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul.

[9:05] Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell. But even though God is angry with sinners, doesn't he still love them?

Or put another popular way, although God hates our sin, doesn't he love the sinner? Well, yes, God does love the sinner. He daily pours out good things into the lives of the most rebellious, defiant God-haters.

He daily restrains our own sinful expressions. Oh, how little the rebel appreciates the incredible blessing of that fact alone, that expression of God's love, his restraining grace.

That the only reason he has not yet turned into a complete monster is because God is restraining his wickedness. But God's love does have a limit. And when his patience finally reaches its end, what does God say will be one of the judgments, at least in this world, that he will perform against those who are God-haters?

We'll look at, again, chapter 1 of Romans, beginning in verse 24. Romans 1, 24. Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.

[10:33] They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator, who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts.

Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way, the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another.

Men committed indecent acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind to do what ought not to be done.

When the rebel finally crosses the line with God, what is his act of judgment against them? Well, simply this. He begins giving them over to the very lusts that they have been demanding all along in their rebellion against his holy laws.

He not only does this with individuals, but corporately with nations, as we've seen and witnessed happening in our own nation. But does saying that God hates sin while still loving the sinner really present the whole picture?

[11:53] Yes, every day the most defiant sinner is not assigned to hell, which in and of itself is an act of incredible grace and mercy and love. But scripture presents another side to God's attitude towards sinners.

Turn to Romans 5. Romans 5 and verse 10. For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his son.

Or listen to Psalms 11, beginning in verse 4. The Lord is in his holy temple. The Lord is on his heavenly throne. He observes the sons of men. His eyes examine them.

The Lord examines the righteous. But the wicked and those who love violence, his soul hates. On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur.

A scorching wind will be their lot. God calls those who reject his son his enemies. He says that his soul hates the wicked.

[13:03] And what actions will come on his enemies, on those he hates? He will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur. A scorching wind will be their lot. Now one can argue all that they want that God doesn't mean he hates them like what we mean when we say we hate somebody.

And certainly my hatred is filled with sinful passions, which God is not. But I don't think my hatred could result in any more negative actions against my enemies than what God says he will do against his enemies.

The bottom line is that you do not want to be someone whom God refers to as his enemy, no matter how many word games we want to play. Well, some have sought to argue away revelations such as these regarding God's negative attitudes towards sinners.

And they would say that God hates sinners in general, but not you as a person in particular. But was God's love toward me personally or generally?

Well, all of Scripture, the Gospel itself, says it's a personal love. Packer summarizes this point in this way.

[14:20] The wrath of God is as personal and as potent as his love. And just as the bloodshedding of the Lord Jesus was the direct manifestation of his Father's love toward us, so it was the direct averting of his Father's wrath against us.

Because God is angry, and God is angry with man, if man has any hope for eternal life, God's wrath must be propitiated.

And that's the second point. And really, we're going to consider both of these last two summaries of the heart of the Gospel together. God's wrath must be propitiated, and God propitiated his wrath through his own Son.

But first, propitiated or expiated. For centuries, liberalism has been trying to take the wrath out of God. So much so that the Revised Standard Version and the New English Bible changes the authorized versions of the translation for propitiation to expiation.

Does it really matter? What does expiation mean? Well, Packer states that expiation denotes the covering, putting away, or rubbing out of sin, so that it no longer constitutes a barrier to friendly fellowship between man and God.

[15:42] Last night, you might recall, Pastor Jason likened expiation to spot remover. It's the rubbing out of sin. Packer goes on, propitiation, however, in the Bible denotes all that expiation means and the pacifying of the wrath of God thereby.

Propitiation adds to expiation the idea of appeasement. And appeasement is not needed where there is no wrath. That's why I say that the liberals have been trying to take the wrath out of God. With expiation, man simply gets cleaned up by Jesus. With propitiation, God's wrath is appeased through Jesus' sacrifice. And then by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, the very death that was the result of God pouring out his wrath on Jesus, God commits to the cleaning up, the expiating of his elect.

To substitute expiation for propitiation is to rip the heart out of the gospel because you're removing the wrath from God and now there is no longer a need for a sacrifice on the cross to propitiate

God's wrath on our behalf.

There's four places where the word propitiation is used in the New Testament and we're going to spend the rest of the morning looking at each of them. The first is found again in Romans.

[17:17] Romans 3, verses 21 to 26. Romans 3, verses 21 to 26. Romans 3, verses 21 to 26.

Romans 3, verses 21 to 26. But now a righteousness from God apart from law has been made known to which the law and the prophets testify. 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.

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

He did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time so as to be just and the one who justifies as those who have faith in Jesus. Here we see the wrath of God or the righteousness of God, I'm sorry, demanding the wrath of God and the consequential judgment against everyone who's broken his commandments.

[18:38] The passage also highlights another distinction between God's wrath and the pagan gods of Greek mythology. As we've said before, the pagan gods were fickle.

They often just became angry for no reason. And so we were in a position of having to appease their wrath that would just flare up at any moment. However, with our God, his anger and the expression of that anger is the only correct response to sinful acts of rebellion against him by his creatures.

God's anger is the righteous expression of his character against sin. And that is a vast difference from the pagan god view. Finally, we see that justice demands propitiation.

If judgment is not to fall on me, it must be absorbed by another who is able to propitiate God's anger on my behalf. And that other person was Christ Jesus.

God provided his own sacrifice to quench his righteous anger against us so that the fury of his wrath could be diverted away from us.

[19:49] I ask, is anything this marvelous ever found in any other religion? And the obvious answer is no. It's beyond comprehension.

But let's look at the second passage where we find propitiation, and that is in Hebrews 2.17. Hebrews 2.17. Hebrews 2.17.

Hebrews 2.17. For this reason, he had to be made like his brothers in every way in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement, make propitiation, for the sins of the people.

This passage provides a small explanation as to what Jesus had to become in order to propitiate my sin. He had to become like me. He had to become man without sin.

The infinite, perfect God had to become a man in order to quench infinite wrath. But more on that in a moment. Let's first go to the third passage, which is 1 John 2.1.

[21:09] 1 John 2.1 and 2. My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin.

But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice, propitiation, for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world.

In this third passage, we're introduced to God's heavenly ministry on our behalf, as well as the efficacy of his work. As humans, one aspect of Christ's propitiating work that we often struggle getting our minds around is its infinite value.

If I reject Christ and so choose to endure God's wrath myself, I will need to suffer all eternity to atone for my sins. In other words, I'll never be able to atone for my sins.

I'll never be able to satisfy God's justice through my own self-sacrifice and hell. But Christ's propitiating work during those few hours on the cross not only atoned for my sins, but for the sins of all his people and the whole world for all time.

[22:38] Let me ask the question in a slightly different way that will likely resonate with more of us, if we're honest. Is it really fair that I should have to suffer an eternity of torments in hell for a few sins that I've committed during a short lifetime on earth?

I won't ask for hands, but has anybody ever thought that? Okay, so I repelled against God for 70 years or so. Wouldn't 70 years in hell suffice for equal payment for that sin? How does eternal punishment of hell commensurate with my offense? I'd like to repeat an illustration I used a number of years ago in which I originally heard from Ted Donnelly in a series he gave on hell.

And I apologize for the graphicness of the illustration, but I think it's needed in order to drive the point home. He speaks of a father watching out the window after a rainstorm with his son playing in the driveway with some worms.

And as he watches, his son is pulling the worms in half. Well, the father doesn't think that's very nice, so he goes out to the driveway and explains to the son that we need to be kind and nice to all of God's creatures.

[24:02] The next day, as he's watching out the window, he notices his son playing outside with a kitten. And to his complete horror, he observes as the son takes the cat and rips the head off.

Well, now, this has gone from worms to kittens, and not only does he get a much more severe rebuke, but disappointed to follow. The following day, the boy runs out to the street where there's a baby carriage and the mom is nearby talking to a neighbor, and the dad is utterly shocked and horrified to see his son reach into the carriage and pull the head off of that baby.

Each dastardly deed was essentially the same act and took the same amount of time to accomplish. Does justice demand the same punishment for all three?

If not, why not? What is the fairness of retribution really based on? The amount of time it took to commit the crime?

Or the actual offense performed? Or is there another factor? In all three cases, the deed took about the same amount of time to commit. And the same basic act of violence was performed against all three creatures.

[25:32] So what's the difference? Let me open the question to you. What's the difference? What makes basically the same act highly more offensive in each proceeding case?

relative worth of the victim.

Yes. The baby was made in the image of God, which goes back to the relative worth of that baby.

Yes. The difference is totally wrapped up in what or whom the sin is committed against.

Do we see that? Do we really appreciate it? This principle is at the heart of the sense of justice that God built into every one of us as being made in his image.

[26:38] Evil done against a worm is of a completely different sort than evil done against a human being. In our sense of justice, we also recognize that the duration of the punishment has little to do with the time it took to perform the evil.

When a murderer performs his dastardly deed, he may have done it in a few seconds. But we all agree that the normal punishment of lifetime imprisonment is just and right.

And when we recognize the justice of such retribution even when considering sins committed against our fellow man, fellow man who is but a creature like ourselves, what of the eternal infinite God?

When we sin against him, nothing less than eternal infinite punishment, will commensurate with the crime, will it not? So what can we conclude about someone, about ourselves, when we struggle with the thought of fairness for needing to spend eternity in hell to pay for our sins against God? Well, we can conclude that we have no appreciation for the glory, the greatness, the otherness of the God against whom we have just committed those crimes.

[28:05] crimes. We simply do not appreciate who he is, and therefore we don't appreciate the need for the punishment that God has assigned.

Understanding hell is all about understanding the magnitude of our crime, not so much because of the crime itself, but because of the infinite nature of the person against whom we've committed the crime.

God had to propitiate God's wrath. When a finite creature attempts to atone for the sins against an infinite being, eternity is required.

However, when an infinite God propitiates infinite wrath, he is able to do so in a few time-space hours on the cross. Jesus is infinite and eternal.

He is God. But Jesus also became man, and as a man, he suffered an eternity of hell for us during the space of those hours.

[29:14] Let's turn to the fourth passage, which is found in 1 John 4, verse 8 through 10. 1 John 4, beginning with verse 8.

Whoever does not love does not know God because God is love. 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, propitiation for our sins. God is in this final passage.

We're told why God sent his son to propitiate our sins. And the answer is simply because he loves us, because of his amazing love, period.

Packer states, redeeming love and retributive justice joined hands, so to speak, at Calvary. For there God showed himself to be just and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus.

[30:29] justice. What would we say to someone who likens our God to the pagan gods of Greek mythology, who demanded human sacrifices?

Well, we'd say that our God provided his own sacrifice to satisfy justice. And in so doing, he demonstrated a love toward us that is completely incomprehensible.

Man could never invent such a God. And we don't have to keep wondering if God's temper is about to flare up against us. When will be the next time that he's going to lose it and come after us and we're going to have to do something to appease him?

No, never such a fear, for we read in Hebrews 10, their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more. And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the love of Jesus, by a new and living way open for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart, in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience, and having our bodies washed with pure water, let us hold on swervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

[32:07] Not one of my acts of wickedness will ever be held against me again. There is no more sacrifice left for me to make. Instead, I am encouraged to draw near to my God with a sincere heart and full assurance of faith.

faith. How can I do this? By having the blood of Christ applied to my heart to cleanse me from a guilty conscience. And how can I be sure that all of this is true?

Because he who promised is faithful. Have you ever considered what life would be like if the true and living God was like one of these Greek mythological gods?

What if God wasn't loving, kind, gracious, merciful, and long suffering? What if God hadn't chosen to make atonement for our sins?

What if God wasn't faithful and true? What if we couldn't count on anything he said? How much do we take our God for granted?

[33:14] Take for granted who he is? When was the last time we thanked him for who he is by comparing him to what the rest of the world has invented in their forms of God?

I think it would be a good exercise of worship for us to consider regularly, to give us a little bit of an appreciation for the magnificence of who it is that we worship.

Well, in my earlier days, I would participate in door-to-door witnessing. And after getting through a quick presentation of the gospel, we would ask the person if they wanted to give their life to Jesus. I would ask them to pray a prayer after me with a guarantee that after they had done so, they'd be instantly into heaven. I remember thinking at the time, this is stupid.

I don't mean to be irreverent. I'm simply being honest about what was going on my heart at the time. Even way back then, the Holy Spirit was graciously prompting me that there was something drastically wrong with the gospel that I was presenting.

[34:28] As if reciting some prayer magically removed someone from the hell column and into the heaven column. It just didn't add up to me. Something seemed to be missing from the equation.

Do you know what that something was? what was missing was really the heart of the gospel. My presentation of the gospel didn't start with the wrath of God and therefore it didn't focus on the propitiating work of Christ.

Its focus was on man. You've got a problem. You do bad things. We all do. We were even discouraged from using the sin word because people might take it offensively.

Rather, we needed to focus on the fact that God loved you and had a wonderful plan for your life.

All you need to do is pray this prayer and you can start reaping the earthly benefits of that plan and

the eternal reward of heaven.

And what are the consequences of de-emphasizing the wrath of God? I think it's best illustrated through a young man I attempted to witness to, and it's still as clear as day, sitting in the band room in high school.

[35 : 48] As we had a break, I turned to him and briefly presented the four spiritual laws, asked him if he wanted to accept Jesus into his heart. And he turned to me and said, that's cool, I've already tried Jesus, it didn't work for me, but hey, if it's good for you, that's cool.

By the way, you want to try some drugs? For much of Christendom today, Jesus has become a fix, not the holy, majestic, sovereign, omnipotent being who he truly is.

And we have offended him, and his wrath is against me personally. I said nothing more to this young man about Christ, but in retrospect I cannot think of a better thing I could have done for him than to quote Romans 2 5, 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.

And then concluded, you need to stop thinking about what Jesus can do for you, and begin considering what Jesus will do against you, if you continue to reject his incredible atoning sacrifice that was offered on your behalf.

But if you do repent, you'll be able to say with the apostle Paul, since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him?

[37 : 31] What's the heart of the gospel? gospel. It's that God is angry with man. God's wrath must be propitiated, and God propitiated his wrath through his own son.

John Piper summarized well how this perspective is related to saving faith. And with this we close.

Saving faith is not merely believing that you are forgiven.

Saving faith means believing that God's forgiveness is an awesome thing. saving faith looks at the horror of sin and then looks at the holiness of God and believe that God's forgiveness is a staggering beauty and unspeakably glorious.

Faith in God's forgiveness does not merely mean confidence that I am off the hook. It means confidence that this is the most precious thing in the world. That's why I use the word cherish.

Saving faith cherishes! being forgiven by God. We're dismissed. may may