

# Defining the Gospel - God's Love or Wrath

Copyright ©, Charles.M Garriott, 2006

It was Christmas in Oklahoma City, and I was on my way to Children's Hospital. The day was to be enjoyed with family and friends, opening gifts and eating special holiday foods. It was in the mid-1980s and some of our acquaintances had fallen on hard times in a state punished by the Penn Square Bank collapse. The family I was going to visit was not in need of work, however: they needed a miracle.

I will not soon forget that very sad December day. The seven-month-old little girl lay in an oxygen tent that was to become her last home after unsuccessful surgery on a brain tumor. When I arrived, her mother and father sat next to her infant bed. Other family members were present as well, comforting each other as the child's breathing slowly vanished. It was not more than a few hours after I arrived when she took her last breath of life and slipped into eternity.

All I could do was weep as the lifeless body was placed in the arms of her mother.

Throughout my years in ministry I often have spent time with a person facing immanent death. These never are easy times for the dying or for the family and friends caring for them.

What must it have been like to sit close to God's Son only hours before He was to take His last breath? Matthew, in his gospel, provides a picture for us of what Christ went through in Gethsemane before His immanent death.

“Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, ‘Sit here while I go over there and pray.’ He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.’ 19

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.’

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. ‘Could you men not keep watch with me

for one hour?’ he asked Peter. ‘Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.’

He went away a second time and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.’

When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!’”

-Matt. 26:36-46

Chapter 26 of Matthew focuses on the end of Christ’s earthly ministry. The triumphal entry into Jerusalem already has taken place along with the last supper with the disciples. Christ has explained to the men that one of them will betray Him, that they will deny Him, and He soon will die.

Perhaps on first reading the passage, one would think that

Christ's soul is overwhelmed with the realities of His immanent suffering and death: Peter's denial, the trial, the lashings and the pain of the cross. But this is not the case. "My soul," He says, "is overwhelmed to the point of death." When has Christ ever spoken such words? What would cause Him to experience such pain, sorrow and trouble? He informs us in verses 38 and 42 that the source of His sorrow and agony is the "cup" that He must drink.

Interestingly enough, I never have known of people being bothered by reading this passage or others like it. We have heard and read accounts of people who have experienced horrific things. The details of someone being mauled to death by a bear or eaten by a shark are not pleasant to read. Yet the real reason why we find no discomfort in reading the Gethsemane account is that we have little understanding of the meaning of the "cup." The Scriptures teach that the "cup" which Christ speaks of here is the wrath of God.

It is not hard to understand why so many Christians ignore this truth of God. I know of no one who regularly praises God for His wrath. Nor do I know of hymns or praise songs that help God's people sing only of the wrath of God. We

may ignore God's wrath, but Christ does not.

## The Cup of Wrath

In Isaiah 51:17 we read,  
 "Awake, awake!  
 Rise up, O Jerusalem,  
 you who have drunk from the hand  
 of the Lord the cup of his wrath,  
 you who have drained to its dregs  
 the goblet that makes men  
 stagger."

Similarly we read in Revelation 14:10: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb."

The "cup" of which Christ was speaking was the cup of wrath. We understand that wrath means deep, intense anger and indignation. Some have pointed out that the Scriptures refer to God's anger, fury and wrath, more than to His love and tenderness. Nahum, in chapter 1, speaks of His wrath:

"The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance

on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies.

3 The LORD is slow to anger and great in power; the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished. His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of his feet.

4 He rebukes the sea and dries it up; he makes all the rivers run dry. Bashan and Carmel wither and the blossoms of Lebanon fade.

5 The mountains quake before him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it.

6 Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him."

God's anger is not the same as ours. Anger to us is the irrational uncontrolled outburst that comes out of a wounded pride or plain bad temper. We become frustrated because we have not obtained what we thought was ours. As a result we verbally or physically lash out at someone.

No, God's wrath is a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil. God's wrath is righteous. God's wrath is His reaction to our sin. It is God's justice at work that results in His wrath. There are many examples of God's wrath in the Bible.

The beginning pages of Genesis reveal numerous examples. In Genesis 6 we are told that the Lord saw how great man's wickedness on earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart were only evil all the time. In verses 17-24 we learn about the outpouring of wrath upon the entire earth.

17 "For forty days the flood kept coming on the earth, and as the waters increased they lifted the ark high above the earth.  
 18 The waters rose and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the surface of the water.  
 19 They rose greatly on the earth, and all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered.  
 20 The waters rose and covered the mountains to a depth of more than twenty feet.  
 21 Every living thing that moved on the earth perished--birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and all mankind.  
 22 Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died.  
 23 Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; men and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds of the air were wiped from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark.

24 The waters flooded the earth for a hundred and fifty days."

One can only imagine what it must have been like to have attempted to escape the rising waters. The brief account of the flood is a picture of total devastation to all life except for those on the ark.

The Apostle Paul says in Romans 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".

When Christ was in the garden, He understood that in going to the cross He would be drinking the cup of God's wrath.

Perhaps it is at this point that Matthew really draws our attention, because it is here that we see the wrath of God and the grace of God come together. Christ did drink the cup. He drank the cup that you and I should take. It is the ultimate picture of His love.

## A Response

With His disciples Christ goes to the garden. Taking Peter, James and John to a mere stone's throw away from Him, He falls with His face to the ground and prays. During this time of appeal, a number of things take place. His

agony is so great that Luke records that His “sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.” At the same time an angel appears and strengthens Him. The weight of what is about to happen places a great deal of strain on the Savior.

What do we see the disciples doing? Sleeping? Yes. How can one be so calloused? Even after the Lord wakes them, in no time at all they fall asleep again. Total insensitivity. We might think that if we had been there it would have been different. We would have stood nearby and been alert to what was happening. We would have at least tried to understand His pain. We would have offered to serve Him. We would have gathered with the others and prayed for the Master. After all, someone facing the wrath of God should not be ignored.

I hope that I would indeed have behaved differently than the disciples. To be honest, however, I am not sure that I would have.

The writer of the book of Hebrews reminds us of the mindset Christ had in taking upon Himself the anger of God.

2”Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

3Consider him who endured such

opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

The more we understand what Christ experienced, the better we understand the depth of His love and grace. It will enable us to have an enduring faith. When we are faced with severe temptations and want to give up, Christ’s example and presence enable us to persevere.

If we believe in the wrath of God, we should look upon the world with great compassion, knowing that two-thirds, at least, are on their way to face His wrath. That compassion should result in specific prayer for such a world. And last of all, we should desire to be in a position to lead our friends to the Savior who took for Himself the cup of wrath.

### *-Reflections-*

1. Is it possible to understand the gospel without understanding God’s wrath?

2. Which Testament of the Bible speaks more about God’s anger and fury, Old or New?

3. How should a Christian view his/her sin in light of God's wrath? What difference should it make?

4. Does God's wrath have any implications for Washington D.C.?