

The Wrath to Come

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[0 : 00] Turn with me now to Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, 1st Thessalonians, and you'll find that on page 1051.

We'll read at verse 8 of chapter 1. Paul talks about the Thessalonians and the impact of the good news in Jesus upon their lives.

For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.

For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

And we want, as we indicated earlier on, to focus particularly on the words, even Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

[1 : 41] Our subject being the wrath to come. I want us just to consider this by way of reconnecting with the study that we embarked on last year.

This is where we left off. And to consider the wrath to come. To consider it as a subject in itself. In other words, to take a thematic approach to the wrath of God.

Not that we're going to neglect the context, of course, but we're going to focus on the reality of the coming wrath, as it is here.

Now you may recall from what we've read, and you may recall from before, that the thing that marked out the Thessalonians is that they had made this great U-turn in their hearts and minds.

They turned from their idol worship to serve the living and true God. They became bond slaves of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[2 : 51] And they served the living and true God day by day. And they also lived in the light of the truth that Jesus was coming again.

But in touching on this and reminding them of how they turned from idolatry to become bond slaves of the living and true God, he touches also on this, on the way that the Savior had worked in them.

And the way that he was continuing his work. Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

And deliverance by Jesus is about the work of Jesus. He delivers us from the state of alienation from God, of going our own way.

And he brings us by his saving work into this wonderful relationship with God, so that we become his bond slaves and we serve him.

[3 : 54] And in this particular reference, he talks about deliverance from the wrath to come. Now, to be brutally frank, the subject of the wrath of God is not an easy subject to preach on.

It's certainly not a popular subject, but it is in the word of God. And it's important that we don't neglect it, that we study it. It's true that it's not pleasing to us as people.

It's not pleasing to man who goes his own way. He doesn't want to think about it. And even theologians and New Testament scholars have relegated the wrath of God to a very low place.

Or they've simply made it redundant and they've talked about it as belonging to the age of the Old Testament. They've simply avoided the teaching of the Bible on the subject.

But not so the apostles. And not so, for that matter, the Savior himself. The apostles followed in the teaching of Christ.

[5 : 11] And they commend to us the doctrines of Christ and of the good news. And one of these is the wrath of God and the wrath to come, as it's called here.

Why does Paul refer to deliverance from this wrath? How is this deliverance effected? What is this all about?

That's where we want to start. Simply to ask, what wrath is this that Paul talks about? And I want to begin by thinking about part of the answer found in Jesus' own teaching.

It's important to notice that the apostles received their teaching from the Savior himself. In that wonderful chapter in John's Gospel, chapter 3, we have the great text that most people know one way or another.

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

[6 : 26] In that same chapter, Jesus talks about the wrath of God. In verse 36, Jesus says that, whosoever believes in the Son of God has, as a present reality when they believe, they have everlasting life.

Whosoever believes has everlasting life. But then he says, And he that believes not the Son will not see life, that is, will not experience this everlasting life.

But the wrath of God abides on him. That's a settled thing. Jesus himself had something to say about the reality of the wrath of God.

And we must keep that in mind when we look at what the apostles had to say about the wrath of God. Here referred to the wrath to come.

Now, we were reading in Romans chapter 2, really to remind ourselves of the reality of this wrath.

[7 : 47] Paul expounded that in chapters 2 and 3, the reality of the wrath of God. And he talked about the Jew who was boasting in the law, but not doing the law, not submitting to it as it presented Jesus.

He was boasting in law keeping as a way of salvation, which Paul shows is simply not on. It's impossible. It must be the Jesus way.

We must see him as our right standing with God. And there, Paul talked about the Jew treasuring up, storing up wrath against the day of wrath.

But in Romans 3, which I have in mind here, in verse 5, Paul asks a question which expects the answer, No.

Is God an righteous who inflicts wrath? And he's really looking at the whole subject, the question of, Is it right for God to inflict wrath upon people?

[9 : 06] And his answer is, May it never be thought that God is unrighteous who inflicts wrath.

In other words, it is right to do that. And may we never imagine that he is unrighteous for doing it. We were singing in Psalm 95, and we had in mind how the writer to the Hebrews quotes with approval, God speaking.

The reference is in Psalm 95, which we were singing. And the reference in Hebrews is Hebrews 3, verses 7 to 11, talking about the rebellious Israelites who refuse God's salvation in the Messiah.

And he speaks about those who depart from the living God, because they've hardened their hearts. To whom God says, To whom I swore, They will not enter my rest.

But I missed something out. To whom I swore in wrath. To whom I swore in wrath.

[10 : 35] They will not enter my rest. So what we're doing here is showing, in the first place, that there is this reality.

God's wrath. And with that we're saying more. We're saying it is wrath that is God's. It is personal to him. It's not some impersonal force.

It is what God exercises. It is, to quote that reference again from Hebrews, It is my wrath, says God. It belongs to me.

It is my response. So then let us be clear on this, that God exercises justly his own wrath against sin.

And that means against those who persist in going against him. He's entitled to do it, and he does it. We mustn't think about that as the pent-up frustration, or the harsh and cruel judgment, of one who somehow takes delight in punishing.

[11 : 55] It's not as if God wants to get his own back, and he delights in that. That is a perversion of the reality of God exercising his wrath.

It's not that he has some gory delight in paying back. I have no pleasure, said the Lord through Ezekiel, in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked should turn from his wicked way and live.

We must not impute to God unrighteousness in any way at all. He's not there with some almost itch to meet out wrath.

Not as if he is, not as if he is like the offended lover, or the offended benefactor, who is hurt, and in the heat of anger, and would pay back.

This is not the way to view God's wrath. We have to see God's wrath as the only adequate response of one who is righteous and holy to those who will not have his way, and who will not do his will.

[13 : 27] This is the way we are to see it. This is what Jesus said to the Jewish authorities that he spoke to, and to whom he came in the first place.

You are not willing that you might have life. You are not willing to receive me. And we need to see that God in his goodness and mercy in the Lord Jesus Christ constrains us by his own love and grace to come to our senses, to come to repentance, to say he's right and I'm wrong.

We read there in Romans in chapter 2, Do you not know that the goodness of God constrains you to repentance? Are you despising that?

His wrath, then, is a reality. It is holy and just. It is his response, his only adequate response, to those who persist in rejecting his claims upon their lives.

And that's why, at a practical level, those who are the Lord's people ought to have a care for others who are going their own way.

[14 : 58] We mustn't leave them to it. That's why the preacher pleads with people who are not closing in with Christ. It matters.

They're concerned that people are under the wrath of God and they're refusing God's way of reconciliation.

Let's therefore take seriously the reality of the wrath of God and see that God does exercise his wrath and he will.

That's the first. The wrath, the question, what wrath is this? It's God's. It's personal to him. It's the only adequate response of a just and holy God to those who persist in having their own way.

The second thing is this, and a question, when is wrath applied? Listen to the words. Even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

[16 : 10] Now I submit to you that the way that comes across suggests that it is future wrath, that it is purely future. It's the wrath to come.

It hasn't come yet. That's a mistake to think that. It's not about the future wrath, which undoubtedly there will be future wrath.

But wrath, the wrath of God is seen as a present reality. It's something that is always present. In fact, for those who are into this, the word here, the coming wrath, is a present participle active.

It's something that's ongoing. ongoing. It does have reference to the future necessarily, but it's something that is present.

It's active. It's ongoing. It's continuing. And that's why it's perhaps better to say from the coming wrath, in the sense that it's coming at us all the time.

[17 : 19] in Romans 1, if we had taken our reading back a wee bit into Romans 1, you find there, Paul says in verse 18, the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

that's on page 999 if you're looking for it. And there you see the wrath of God is being revealed.

In the version I'm looking at it says is revealed. And that again just blurs the meaning a little bit. Is being revealed. It's a present reality.

It's a continuing reality. It is being revealed. It is a present reality. That's what we're saying.

It is a revelation of the wrath of God. And it's not just limited, you see, to awesome events in world history like wars or massive floods or famines or storms or earthquakes.

[18 : 47] True, these are part of his purpose and of manifestations of his wrath against all ungodliness.

people. But it's not just that. It can be the withholding of spiritual and moral light from people.

Allowing them to go on in their own ways. Confirming them in their life and lifestyle choices. You find that at the end of Romans chapter 1.

And by so leaving them to these things, they're experiencing wrath in that the more they indulge themselves in wickedness, the more grief they have.

And coming home to ourselves here, it's true to say that the more light of scripture we abuse by neglect, the more we are in carrying wrath upon ourselves.

[19 : 54] That's not to say we're necessarily aware of it. It's not that we're going around with a big cloud over a smart wrath. Sometimes the evidence of the wrath of God in our life is sheer frustration.

Some scholars think that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes towards the end of his life. And if you know anything about Solomon, Solomon at the end of his life, when he was old, allowed the wives that he had accumulated to turn his heart away from the Lord and to follow and worship their gods.

And Solomon in Ecclesiastes writes again and again, all is vanity and vexation of spirit, a chasing of the wind.

God inflicted upon him his wrath in that sense. I'm not saying therefore he was unsaved, not saying at all, but he experienced the frustration and the anger and the anguish of someone who was paying for his error.

So we can experience it. Here in this world, we will experience it in the intermediate state, when at death, our spirit wings its way, as it were, into God's presence, and our body is disposed of or laid in the grain.

[21 : 37] In the intermediate state, that state before the final resurrection and the uniting of body and spirit again, in that state, in the intermediate state, there is still the experience of the wrath of God for those who die in their sins.

To my mind, the most helpful way of illustrating this is to think about the Lord's people when they die. They pass a death as enclosed spirits into Christ's presence.

They're there with him in the heavenly glory in paradise. And just as they enjoy his presence in a real and satisfying way, on the opposite side, you have those who go out into a lost eternity, who in the intermediate state of things, experience the penalty, the penal inflictions, if you like, for their sins committed here.

And they're miserable and unfulfilled. There is that state of things. And there's the final state of things.

When godly and ungodly alike are raised in resurrection bodies, the one suited for eternity lost and the other for eternity blessed.

[23 : 12] And again, you see, you have an illustration of the better side and then of the worst side. You have the lord's people clothed upon with eternal blessedness to experience in the body, in the resurrection body, the spiritual joy and peace and the satisfying delights of being with the lord and of serving him forever.

But on the other hand, in the resurrection body, the body of contempt, Paul calls it, you have people under the wrath of God.

Confirmed in that state and apportioned wrath according to one's degree of unbelief or disobedience.

So it is coming wrath as a present reality. It is coming wrath in the intermediate state. It is coming wrath in the final state.

Let's take it seriously. Let's recognize as those who have much light from the Bible over many decades that we pay the closest attention to these things, that we really pay the closest attention to them, lest we should drift away from them and incur here and hereafter the wrath of God.

[24 : 53] I remember once reading in a sermon of Martin Lloyd-Jones that he hoped and he prayed that the people who listened to him would go home after the sermon and get on their knees and thank God for the word he brought.

Perhaps more of us should do that as preachers and more of us as hearers should do the same. Get down on their knees and if you can't where you are sitting and thank God for the word, even such a word as this on the wrath of God.

The last thing I want to consider, who are delivered from God's wrath? Now there are a number of ways of answering the question, who are they?

were delivered from God's wrath. All of them are biblical and theological. We can say in a word, well those who like the Thessalonians received the word of God in power and in the Holy Spirit.

They were transformed by that word. They received Jesus as it were with open arms. They were glad to hear there was a saviour for them to deliver them from their lifestyle, their idolatry, and to change their lives, to set them going Godward.

[26 : 33] You've heard me say before, idolatry is not just about the carved image of wood or stone or precious metal. Idolatry is about having our own desires at heart, at heart, where Christ should reign.

It's about having our own way, absorbed in our own interests. That's idolatry, that excludes the Lord from the place that is the throne of our heart.

And the Thessalonians, you see, have it said about them, they received the good news in Jesus, and they were transformed by it. They turned from idols to serve the living and true God.

So that's one way of answering. Those who saw or see in Jesus, their Messiah, God's propitiation, God's justice satisfying, sin covering, wrath exhausting sacrifice, and they receive it simply by faith, and rest on him.

Friends, we're to make these things our very own. He didn't make it possible for us by dying. He effected something we receive.

[28 : 08] May I say it reverently, He effected a whole perfect package of salvation for us, which we receive, in all the many aspects.

And we receive him and his work simply by faith. God's God's God's God's purpose.

But back of it all, such people are delivered in this word in time because of God's purpose. It's not just down to us. And we ought to take encouragement from this.

Some people say the doctrine of election takes away a sense of human responsibility, not a bit of it. just because the Bible says the Lord knows those that are his.

There's no excuse for saying, well, I don't know if I'm his or not. What we're to do is listen to the word and believe the report and make it our serious business to beg him to save us, to beg him to confirm his word to us that we're saved.

[29 : 19] We've got to be about the business seriously. somebody once told me about years ago when he was getting a loan for a house, he virtually begged for the loan.

Nowadays, they throw them at you. The more debt you have, the more chance you have of getting a loan. They've turned the thing on its head. I use the word beg deliberately.

We're to take him seriously. We're to beg him. We're to plead with him. As Professor Findlayson said, although as if it all depended on Nebraska, knowing full well that it all depends on the goodness and the mercy of the Lord.

But you see here in this very chapter, Paul says that he remembers the Thessalonians, verse 3, without ceasing, their work of faith, their labor of love, their patience, perseverance, their perseverance and hope, knowing your election of God.

But you see, it was known because of the evidence of the change in their lives. And that's the way we should think about it.

[30 : 39] The sovereign work of God, of the Father who draws us to Christ, is something we want surely to know has happened to us, is happening to us.

Surely. When Jesus said, no one can come to me, John 6, 44, no one can come to me except the Father who sent me, draws them.

That, you see, ought to stir our hearts and say, well, I've got to be asking him to draw me. I've got to cast myself upon him.

You, he made alive who were dead in sins. Ephesians 2, verse 1. I hear that word, you, he made alive who were dead in sins.

Well, if he makes alive those who are dead in sins, if he brings us out of the wrath to come, then I've got to be busy in asking him to confirm to me that he's done this.

[31 : 46] We are to glory in the fact that it is written in the word of God, your people shall be willing in the day of your power.

That's what it says concerning Jesus in Psalm 110, verse 3. There will be willing volunteers in the day of your power.

what do we do with that? We take it to him. Lord, make me willing in the day of your power. Confirm to me that my response is a willing response.

The prophet Hosea said, and I repeat it willingly, take with you words and speak to him as if your life depended on it.

Because, as the children say, you know what? It does. Deliverance from the wrath took him.

[32 : 52] We need to be serious in taking our own case to the Lord and pleading with him that in his love and grace he would confirm that he is the one who delivers us from the coming wrath.

And that makes us identify then, you see, with the Thessalonians. We've turned to God from idols, whatever our idols be, and we turn as those now delivered from the coming wrath, and we look forward to the Jesus who is coming again.

And we can identify with the words of Scripture and the words of the hymn writers too, how long Lord Jesus, how long till we hear the glad sound, behold, he comes, and he comes to receive his own.

Amen.