

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

THEOLOGY PROPER

The Doctrine of God

UNIT 5: THE COMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Lesson 18

The Wrath of God

The Holy Hatred of Sin and the Certainty of Judgment

Key Texts: Romans 1:18; Romans 3:25; John 3:36; Nahum 1:2–3; Revelation 6:16–17

The Wrath of the Lamb — The Attribute the Church Cannot Afford to Silence

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author

faithfultotheword.com

Series Verse

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

Romans 11:33–36, NASB 1995

Introduction

In Lessons 14 through 17 we have worked through the communicable attributes that constitute the most celebrated dimensions of God's moral character: holiness, righteousness, justice, goodness, love, grace, mercy, patience, omnipotence, and sovereignty. We have pressed each of them to their full scriptural depth, found in each one not merely an isolated theological topic but a facet of the single, coherent, magnificent divine character that finds its supreme expression in the cross of Jesus Christ. Now, in Lesson 18, the final lesson of Unit 5 and the closing lesson of our study of the communicable attributes, we take up the attribute that is, in our present cultural moment, the most systematically ignored, the most deliberately suppressed, and the most urgently needed in the church's proclamation: the wrath of God.

No attribute of God has been more thoroughly marginalized in contemporary Christianity than His wrath. It has been dismissed as a primitive theological relic, softened into a vague divine displeasure, privatized into an impersonal "law of consequences," or simply removed from the church's vocabulary on the grounds that it is incompatible with the loving God that our cultural moment demands. The result is a church that preaches a gospel without a problem, a message of grace that has no holiness to satisfy, a message of love that has no wrath to absorb, a message of salvation that has no condemnation from which to save. And a church that has lost the wrath of God has also, inevitably, lost the weight of the cross, the urgency of repentance, and the genuine good news of the gospel.

This lesson is designed to recover the wrath of God in its full biblical dignity and its full gospel significance. We will define divine wrath with the precision it deserves, establish the comprehensive biblical testimony to its reality, press the crucial relationship between wrath and love that makes the cross intelligible, examine the eschatological dimensions of divine wrath that the New Testament declares with unsparing sobriety, and close with the pastoral urgency that should govern every preacher and teacher who handles this most uncomfortable and most necessary of all the divine attributes: the gospel is good news precisely because the wrath of God is real.

I. Defining Divine Wrath: Settled, Righteous, and Personal Opposition to Evil

The wrath of God is His settled, righteous, and personal opposition to all that is evil. Each of these three adjectives is theologically significant and guards against a specific distortion of the doctrine.

A. Wrath Is Settled

The wrath of God is not a sudden eruption of divine temper, not a momentary loss of divine composure, not the kind of explosive anger that human beings experience when their patience is finally exhausted. It is settled, the permanent, consistent, unvarying moral disposition of the infinitely pure God toward everything that is morally evil. It does

not fluctuate. It does not increase and decrease with the emotional temperature of the divine being. It is as constant and as consistent as the holiness from which it flows.

Romans 1:18 declares: “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (NASB 1995). The verb “is revealed” (Greek: *apokalypsetai*) is a present passive indicative, a continuous, ongoing, present-tense revelation of something that is not a past event but a present and permanent reality. The wrath of God is not a future threat that hangs over the unrighteous like a sword yet to fall; it is a present, ongoing, continuously revealed reality of divine opposition to human ungodliness and unrighteousness.

B. Wrath Is Righteous

The wrath of God is not arbitrary, not capricious, not the expression of a divine personality that is given to unreasonable anger. It is righteous, the perfectly just, morally grounded, entirely appropriate response of the absolutely holy God to moral evil. It is not wrath that overreacts to minor infractions; it is the precisely calibrated, always proportional, always deserved response of the God whose own character is the ultimate moral standard, and whose wrath is therefore the most morally reliable thing in the universe.

Nahum 1:2–3 provides one of the most theologically precise Old Testament descriptions of divine wrath in both its intensity and its righteousness:

“A jealous and avenging God is the LORD; the LORD is avenging and wrathful. The LORD takes vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies. The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.”, Nahum 1:2–3, NASB 1995

The passage holds the wrath of God in perfect balance with two other divine attributes. First, “the LORD is slow to anger”: the wrath of God is not hasty, impulsive, or easily provoked; it is restrained by His patience, extended by His long-suffering. Second, “the LORD will by no means leave the guilty unpunished”: the restraint of divine wrath is not moral indifference; the patience has its limit, and when that limit is reached, the wrath that has been withheld is released with the full force of the divine righteousness that demanded it. The balance is precise and uncompromising: patient and wrathful simultaneously; slow to anger and absolutely certain to punish.

C. Wrath Is Personal

The wrath of God is not the impersonal outworking of a moral law that automatically produces negative consequences for sin, as some modern theologians have argued in order to soften the doctrine’s sharp edges. It is personal, the active, directed, morally engaged opposition of the living God to the specific persons and acts that violate His holy character. The Scripture speaks of God’s wrath being “stored up” (Romans 2:5), “poured out” (Revelation 16:1), and “desired against” specific objects (Psalm 7:11: “God is a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation every day,” NASB 1995). These are the descriptions of a personal, directed, morally serious engagement, not the description of an automatic moral mechanism.

The personal character of divine wrath is what makes the gospel both necessary and significant. An impersonal mechanism has no personal agent to satisfy, no character to honor, and no relationship to restore. But the personal wrath of a personal God can be personally satisfied, in the Person of the Son who voluntarily absorbed the wrath directed against those He came to save, so that the personal relationship between the holy God and the guilty sinner could be restored through the personal act of propitiation.

II. Wrath as Attribute, Not Merely Action: The Necessary Response of Holiness to Sin

One of the most important theological distinctions in the doctrine of divine wrath is the distinction between wrath as an attribute of God's character and wrath as an occasional act of God's governance. Both dimensions are real, but the attribution of wrath to the divine character is the more fundamental claim, and it is the claim that most contemporary theology is most reluctant to make.

To say that wrath is an attribute of God is to say that it is not merely something God does on particular occasions when particularly grievous sins come to His attention; it is something God is, a permanent, consistent moral disposition of the divine character that is as fundamental to who God is as His holiness, righteousness, and love. Psalm 7:11 declares: "God is a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation every day" (NASB 1995). The "every day" is the indicator that what is being described is not an occasional emotional response but a continuous moral disposition, the settled, daily, uninterrupted indignation of the righteous God toward the moral evil that pervades His creation.

The reason wrath must be understood as an attribute rather than merely an action is that the alternative, a God who has love as a fundamental character trait but wrath merely as an occasional behavioral response, creates an incoherent theological portrait. If God is the holy, righteous, morally perfect God who is constitutionally incapable of approving evil (Habakkuk 1:13), then His settled opposition to evil is as characteristic of His being as His love for righteousness. A God who loved righteousness but was not consistently, constitutively opposed to unrighteousness would be a moral incoherence, not a moral perfection.

The connection between holiness and wrath is the theological key to understanding why wrath must be an attribute. We established in Lesson 14 that holiness is the crown of the communicable attributes, the attribute that qualifies and governs all others. The holiness of God is His infinite moral purity, His absolute separation from all that is evil. Wrath is what that holiness does when it encounters evil: it opposes it, consistently, necessarily, and with a moral seriousness proportional to the infinite purity of the God from whom it flows. Holiness without wrath would be a holiness that had no moral consequence, a purity that could coexist with impurity, which is a contradiction in terms. Wrath is the active, relational, morally serious expression of divine holiness in the face of sin.

III. The Biblical Testimony: A Pervasive and Unambiguous Witness

The biblical testimony to the wrath of God is not confined to a handful of isolated proof texts in the more “difficult” portions of the Old Testament. It is a pervasive, comprehensive, and entirely unambiguous witness that spans every major section of both Testaments, and that, if anything, intensifies rather than diminishes as the revelation moves toward its New Testament climax.

In the Old Testament, the wrath of God is expressed through a rich vocabulary. The Hebrew terms include *ʾāp* (אָפ, burning anger, from the root meaning “to breathe heavily” in intense emotion), *qesep* (קֶסֶף, fury, indignation), and *hēmāh* (הֵמָּה, wrath, heat, passion). These terms appear hundreds of times in the Old Testament, describing both the settled character of God’s opposition to evil and the specific acts of divine judgment by which that opposition is expressed in history. The Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the plagues of Egypt, the wilderness deaths of rebellious Israel, the judgment of the nations, the Babylonian exile, all of these are presented in the canonical narrative as acts of divine wrath against specific sins and specific sins.

In the New Testament, far from the wrath of God being softened or abandoned as a theological category, it is made more precise, more personal, and more urgent. The Lord Jesus speaks of divine wrath and eternal judgment more than any other biblical writer. The Sermon on the Mount contains the most terrifying words of Jesus, the warnings of Gehenna, of the outer darkness, of the weeping and gnashing of teeth, of the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 5:22, 29–30; 13:42, 50; 25:41, 46). The apostle Paul opens his letter to the Romans with the most systematic theological account of divine wrath in the New Testament (Romans 1:18–3:20), establishing it as the universal human problem to which the gospel is the divine solution. And the final book of the Bible, the Revelation of John, contains some of the most vivid and most explicit descriptions of divine wrath in the entire canon.

John 3:36 provides the most concise and most direct New Testament declaration of divine wrath as the present, permanent condition of those who reject Christ:

“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”, John 3:36, NASB 1995

The verb “abides” (Greek: *menō*) is the same verb used in John 15 for the believer’s “abiding” in Christ, a continuous, ongoing, present-tense dwelling. The wrath of God is not a future threat pending over the unbeliever; it is the present, continuous condition of every person who has not, through faith in the Son, been transferred from the realm of wrath into the realm of life. This is the diagnosis that gives the gospel its urgency: not that all people are heading toward wrath, but that apart from Christ, all people are presently, continuously under it.

IV. The Unpopularity of Wrath and the Church’s Responsibility

The wrath of God is, in our present cultural moment, among the most systematically avoided doctrines in contemporary Christianity, and the avoidance takes several characteristic forms. The first is simple omission: the doctrine is simply not preached, not taught, not included in the church’s theological vocabulary. The second is redefinition: the “wrath” of God is reinterpreted as an impersonal moral law, the

automatic consequence of sin in a morally ordered universe, with no personal divine agent who is personally offended and personally opposed. The third is the temporal restriction: God's wrath is acknowledged as a future possibility (the "day of wrath") but its present, ongoing reality is denied. The fourth is the subordination of wrath to love: God's love is presented as His primary and essential attribute, while His wrath is presented as a secondary, reluctant, or essentially temporary reaction that His love is always in the process of overcoming.

Each of these strategies represents a failure of theological nerve, a capitulation to the cultural preference for a comfortable, non-threatening deity, and each of them has devastating consequences for the church's proclamation of the gospel. The theologian Leon Morris observed decades ago that "the wrath of God is one of the most significant features of the Biblical presentation of God, but it is one to which full justice has not always been done." That observation is, if anything, more urgently true today than when it was written.

The church cannot afford to silence the wrath of God without simultaneously silencing the gospel. The reason is simple and inescapable: the gospel is the announcement that God has, in Christ, provided the solution to the most urgent problem in the universe. That problem is not loneliness, not lack of purpose, not psychological dysfunction, not social injustice, though the gospel addresses all of these in its wide implications. The most urgent problem in the universe is that every human being stands under the settled, righteous, personal wrath of the holy God, and that no human resource is sufficient to address that wrath. If the church loses the wrath of God, it loses the urgency of the gospel; and if it loses the urgency of the gospel, it has no message that is genuinely, irreversibly different from what the world already knows and says.

The motivation for proclaiming the wrath of God is not the desire to terrorize, to dominate, or to depress. It is the love of souls. The preacher who understands the wrath of God and truly loves his congregation cannot remain silent about it, any more than a physician who knows the diagnosis can withhold it from the patient in order to preserve a comfortable relationship. The love that suppresses the wrath of God is not pastoral love; it is pastoral cowardice. The love that declares the wrath of God is the love that makes the good news genuinely good, because good news is only good news against the backdrop of the very bad news that makes salvation necessary.

V. The Relationship Between Wrath and Love: Not Opposites but Expressions of the Same Character

The most common and most theologically distorting mistake in popular discussions of divine wrath is the assumption that wrath and love are in fundamental opposition, that a God of love cannot also be a God of wrath, and that therefore the emphasis on divine wrath must be qualified by a competing emphasis on divine love until the two have been brought into the balance that a morally sophisticated theology requires. This assumption is wrong at every level, and correcting it is one of the most important theological tasks of this lesson.

The wrath of God is not the opposite of His love. It is the expression of His love, specifically, His love for righteousness, His love for justice, and His love for the creatures who are damaged and destroyed by sin. Consider: a parent who watches her child being harmed and responds with total equanimity, with no anger, no moral opposition, no determined resistance, is not a more loving parent than one who is righteously angry on the child's behalf. She is a less loving parent, because her equanimity in the face of the child's harm reveals an indifference to the child's good that love cannot sustain. The wrath of God against sin is not the failure of His love; it is one of its most fundamental expressions.

Furthermore, the wrath of God is not in tension with His love in a way that requires the cross to adjudicate between them. The cross is not the place where God's love defeats His wrath, or where God's wrath is finally overcome by His love. The cross is the place where God's love and God's wrath converge in a single, magnificent, simultaneous act of divine self-giving: God's love provides the propitiation; God's wrath is the propitiation that love satisfies. Both attributes are fully, completely, and simultaneously expressed in the same act, the death of the Son of God in the place of sinners.

Romans 3:25–26, which we examined at length in Lesson 15, is the biblical demonstration of this convergence: God presented Christ as a propitiation “to demonstrate His righteousness” and “so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” The same act that satisfies the divine wrath also displays the divine love; the same cross that absorbs the divine judgment also extends the divine mercy. The love and the wrath are not competing attributes fighting for control of the divine agenda; they are co-expressive dimensions of the single, holy, simple divine character, finding their most unified and most glorious expression at the cross.

A. W. Pink, in his classic work *The Attributes of God*, observed that the same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay. The same divine reality, the holy, righteous, loving, wrathful God, is received differently by different hearts: by the repentant sinner as grace, by the hardened rebel as wrath. The difference is not in God; it is in the orientation of the one who encounters Him. And the gospel is the announcement that the God who would encounter us in wrath has provided, in Christ, the means by which we may encounter Him in grace.

VI. The Cross: Where Wrath and Love Converge in Propitiation

We have already examined the doctrine of propitiation at length in Lesson 15, but it must receive its due emphasis here as the central and climactic resolution of the wrath of God in redemptive history. The wrath of God that Romans 1:18 declares to be revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness is the same wrath that Romans 3:25 declares to have been absorbed, in the cross of Christ, by the Son of God who was presented as a propitiation in His blood.

The concept of propitiation, the appeasement of wrath through sacrifice, is the theological hinge upon which the entire evangelical understanding of the atonement turns. It is the concept that makes sense of why the Son had to die, why the death had to involve blood, and why the death of a morally perfect substitute could accomplish what no human religious performance could achieve. The wrath of God against sin is

not cancelled by divine fiat; it is satisfied by the bearing of its full penalty by the One who voluntarily stood in the sinner's place.

First John 2:2 adds a crucial dimension to the propitiation: "and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world" (NASB 1995). The present-tense "is" (not "was") indicates that Christ's propitiatory work is not merely a past event that satisfied God's wrath in a closed transaction; it is the present and permanent basis upon which the wrath of God is held back from all who are in Christ, and upon which the gospel's offer of salvation is extended to the whole world. The propitiation is not exhausted by its historical accomplishment; it is the living, continuous, presently operative ground upon which the holy God receives sinners into His favor.

The substitutionary character of the propitiation, Christ bearing the wrath directed against those He came to save, is what gives the atonement its moral logic and its personal character. God did not simply decide to overlook the wrath that sin deserves; He addressed it, fully and finally, in the Person of His Son. The wrath that would have fallen on every believer was poured out on the One who bore it in their place. And the God who poured out His wrath on His own Son is the same God who, in that same act, extended His love to every sinner who would flee to the propitiation for refuge. The cross is not the story of a conflict between divine wrath and divine love with love winning out; it is the story of the single, holy, self-consistent God expressing both His wrath and His love in the most unified and most magnificent act in the history of the universe.

VII. The Eschatological Wrath: The Final Judgment and the Reality of Hell

The wrath of God is not merely a present reality (Romans 1:18; John 3:36) and not merely a past event resolved at the cross; it also has an eschatological dimension, a future, final, comprehensive expression of divine justice that the Scripture declares with sobriety and urgency, and from which the church must not flinch. The final judgment is the ultimate display of divine justice in the eschatological removal of all evil from God's creation and the comprehensive vindication of His righteousness.

Revelation 6:16–17 provides one of the most vivid and most theologically striking descriptions of eschatological wrath in the entire New Testament. In the context of the opening of the sixth seal, the kings and great men and every slave and free person cry out to the mountains and rocks: "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" (NASB 1995).

"and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?'" , Revelation 6:16–17, NASB 1995

The passage is theologically remarkable for two reasons. First, it is the wrath of the Lamb, the wrath of the One who is most prominently identified throughout the Revelation as the Lamb who was slain (Revelation 5:6, 9, 12), the One whose

propitiation has been the basis of grace throughout the present age. The Lamb who bore the wrath on behalf of the redeemed is also the Lamb from whom the wrath of the final judgment proceeds. The grace and the judgment are not two different modes of the divine character at war with each other; they are the same holy, righteous character expressed in relation to those who have accepted and those who have rejected the propitiation.

Second, the rhetorical question, “who is able to stand?”, expects the answer: no one, apart from the one who stands in Christ. The final judgment is the eschatological revelation of what the present wrath of God (Romans 1:18) has always been moving toward: the comprehensive, irreversible, public vindication of the divine righteousness in the final accounting for every act, every word, every intention, and every suppression of truth that has ever occurred in the history of the human race.

The reality of hell is the corollary of the eschatological wrath of God and the permanent consequence of the refusal of the propitiation. The Lord Jesus speaks of hell more than any other biblical writer, describing it as Gehenna, the outer darkness, the unquenchable fire, the place where the worm does not die (Mark 9:43–48), and “the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41, NASB 1995). The church that loses the wrath of God loses the urgency that the reality of hell creates for the proclamation of the gospel. The church that preaches the wrath of God and the reality of hell is the church that has the most compelling reason to preach the gospel with the most desperate urgency: the good news is infinitely good precisely because the bad news is this bad.

VIII. The Pastoral Urgency: The Gospel Is Good News Because Wrath Is Real

We close Lesson 18, and with it, Unit 5 on the communicable attributes of God, with the pastoral urgency that the doctrine of divine wrath places upon the church’s ministry. This urgency is not the urgency of terrorism, not the urgency that drives people to the gospel through fear alone. It is the urgency of genuine love for the souls of those who are, apart from Christ, under the settled, righteous, personal, and eternal wrath of the holy God.

The pastoral urgency of the wrath of God operates in three directions simultaneously.

A. For the Evangelist: The Gospel Has Gravity

The evangelist who knows the wrath of God preaches a gospel with genuine urgency, genuine weight, and genuine good news. The gospel is not a suggestion for improving your life, an invitation to join a supportive community, or a resource for finding personal fulfillment. It is the announcement that the God before whom every human being will stand in judgment has provided, at infinite cost, the means of escaping that judgment through faith in His Son. The urgency of that announcement is directly proportional to the reality of the wrath it addresses. Take away the wrath, and the gospel becomes merely a nice offer from a helpful deity; restore the wrath, and the gospel becomes the most urgent message ever spoken, addressed to the most desperate need ever faced.

B. For the Believer: Grace Is Magnificent

The believer who knows the wrath of God from which she has been delivered knows the full magnitude of the grace she has received. Ephesians 2:3–4 captures the movement precisely: “by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy ... made us alive.” The grace is as great as the wrath it addresses; and the wrath is settled, righteous, personal, and eternal. The believer who lives with the full awareness of what she has been saved from, the wrath of the holy, just, omnipotent God, the wrath of the Lamb, the eternal fire, is the believer who will never cease to wonder at the grace that met her there. Great is the grace precisely because great is the wrath. The cross is beautiful precisely because the darkness it absorbed was real.

C. For the Preacher: The Whole Counsel of God

Paul’s declaration to the Ephesian elders at Miletus, “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27, NASB 1995), is the mandate and the standard for every gospel minister. The whole counsel of God includes the wrath of God. The preacher who systematically avoids the wrath of God, who edits it out of his vocabulary, sanitizes it from his treatment of key texts, and builds a ministry on the presumption that his congregation will be more receptive to a message that omits what the Bible prominently includes, is not a faithful steward of the whole counsel of God. He is a coward who has chosen the approval of his audience over the faithfulness demanded by his commission.

The preacher who declares the wrath of God faithfully, in the context of the full counsel that includes the love of God, the grace of God, and the propitiation of Christ, is the preacher who sets his congregation free to receive the gospel in its full weight, its full urgency, and its full glory. For the gospel is good news, genuinely, irreversibly, transformingly good news, precisely because the news from which it saves is this bad. The wrath of God and the love of God, the judgment of the cross and the grace of the cross, the reality of hell and the glory of heaven: these are not theological opposites to be managed into a comfortable balance. They are the two sides of the single magnificent reality that the faithful preacher is commissioned to declare: Jesus Christ, who saves from the wrath to come (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

Key Texts (NASB 1995)

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.”

Romans 3:25

“whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed.”

John 3:36

“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

Nahum 1:2–3

“A jealous and avenging God is the LORD; the LORD is avenging and wrathful. The LORD takes vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies. The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.”

Revelation 6:16–17

“and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?’”

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Wrath of God	God’s settled, righteous, and personal opposition to all that is evil. Not arbitrary emotional volatility or impersonal moral law, but the necessary, consistent, morally proportionate response of the infinitely holy God to sin. An attribute of God’s character (Psalm 7:11: “indignation every day”), not merely an occasional action. Presently revealed from heaven against ungodliness (Romans 1:18) and continuously abiding on those who reject the Son (John 3:36).
ʾĀp (אָפּ)	Primary Hebrew term for God’s wrath, from a root meaning “to breathe heavily” in intense emotion. Literally, “nostril” or “anger,” often translated “wrath,” “anger,” or “fury.” Used hundreds of times in the Old Testament to describe both the settled character of God’s moral opposition to evil and the specific historical acts of divine judgment by which that opposition is expressed.
Orge (ὀργή)	Primary Greek term for wrath in the New Testament, used by Paul in Romans 1:18 (“the wrath of God is revealed”) and throughout Paul’s letters for both God’s present opposition to sin and the eschatological “day of wrath” (Romans 2:5). Distinguished from thymos (θυμός), which connotes passionate, intense wrath, and is used in Revelation for the final eschatological outpouring of divine judgment (Revelation 14:10, 19; 15:1; 16:1, 19).

Settled Wrath	The character of divine wrath as a consistent, permanent, morally serious disposition of God toward all that is evil, not an occasional emotional response but a continuous, daily moral opposition (Psalm 7:11). Contrasted with the impulsive, fluctuating, arbitrary anger of which human beings are capable. The settled character of divine wrath is what makes it morally reliable and what grounds its connection to the holiness and righteousness from which it flows.
Impersonal Wrath Theory	The theological proposal (associated with C. H. Dodd and others) that the wrath of God in the New Testament refers not to a personal divine attitude toward sinners but to the impersonal outworking of a moral law, the automatic consequence of sin built into the moral structure of the universe. Rejected by most biblical scholars as incompatible with the biblical language of divine “indignation,” “storing up wrath,” and the personal, directed character of divine judgment throughout both Testaments.
Propitiation (Hilastērion / Hilasmos)	The appeasement of divine wrath through the offering of a sacrifice. In Romans 3:25, hilastērion describes Christ’s atoning work as the satisfaction of God’s righteous wrath against sin. In 1 John 2:2, hilasmos describes Christ as the presently operative propitiation for the sins of the whole world. The cross is the place where God’s wrath and God’s love converge: the love provides the propitiation; the wrath is the propitiation that love satisfies.
Eschatological Wrath	The future, final, comprehensive expression of divine wrath in the last judgment (Revelation 6:16–17; 2 Thessalonians 1:6–8). Distinguished from present wrath (Romans 1:18; John 3:36) by its finality, comprehensiveness, and irresistibility. The great day of wrath (Revelation 6:17) is the ultimate vindication of divine justice in the final accounting for every act, word, and intention. The permanent consequence of refusing the propitiation is eternal separation from God’s gracious presence (Matthew 25:46).
Wrath of the Lamb	The striking phrase of Revelation 6:16 that identifies the One from whose wrath the unbelieving world flees in the eschatological judgment as “the Lamb”, the sacrificed, slain Lamb of the cross whose propitiation has been the basis of grace throughout the present age. The same Lamb who absorbed the wrath on behalf of the redeemed in His death is the Lamb from whose wrath the unrepentant flee at the final judgment. The grace and the judgment are not opposites; they are expressions of the same holy, righteous character.
Hell (Gehenna)	The New Testament’s primary term for the place of final, eternal punishment. Greek geenna, from Hebrew Ge-Hinnom (the valley of Hinnom), the site south of Jerusalem associated with child sacrifice and later with the city’s burning refuse, a place of unquenchable fire and ongoing corruption. Used by Jesus more than any other biblical writer (Matthew 5:22, 29–30; Mark 9:43–48; Matthew 25:46) for the eternal consequence of refusing the grace of God and remaining under His wrath.

Whole Counsel of God

Paul's self-description of his apostolic ministry in Acts 20:27: "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose (boulēn) of God." A standard for faithful ministry that includes the wrath of God alongside His love, the reality of judgment alongside the offer of grace, the seriousness of sin alongside the sufficiency of the atonement. The preacher who systematically omits the wrath of God has not declared the whole counsel of God.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the wrath of God is a genuine, biblical, theologically essential attribute of the divine character, not a primitive theological embarrassment to be softened, not an impersonal moral mechanism to be depersonalized, and not a secondary attribute to be subordinated to love in a way that makes love effectively override it. We must believe that the wrath of God is settled (continuous and consistent), righteous (perfectly just and morally proportionate), and personal (directed, morally engaged, and capable of being personally satisfied). We must believe that the wrath and the love of God are not in competition but are co-expressive dimensions of the same holy character, finding their most unified expression at the cross. And we must believe that the gospel is good news precisely because it addresses the most urgent reality in the universe: the wrath of the Lamb from which every human being apart from Christ is not heading toward but is presently, continuously under.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The wrath of God, rightly understood and genuinely believed, should produce in the believer a depth of gratitude for the propitiation of Christ that no other doctrine can produce. The person who knows what the wrath of God is, who has stood, even in imagination, before the prospect of the great day of their wrath and asked with the inhabitants of Revelation 6:17 "who is able to stand?", and who then hears the declaration of Romans 3:25, that God has displayed Christ as the propitiation who stands in the place of all who believe, knows the gospel with a depth and a gratitude that no comfortable, wrath-free Christianity can produce. Let the wrath of God produce in you not terror but wonder: wonder that the One before whose wrath you stood has, in Christ, provided the Lamb who absorbed it on your behalf.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

1. **Preach and teach the wrath of God without flinching.** The whole counsel of God includes the wrath of God. The minister who systematically avoids it has not declared the full gospel; the Sunday school teacher who sanitizes it from her lessons has not given her students the full picture; the parent who never speaks of divine judgment to his children has not prepared them for the full weight of what the gospel addresses. Declare the wrath of God in the context of the full

counsel, with love, with pastoral care, and with the urgency of one who knows both the severity of the problem and the sufficiency of the solution.

2. **Use the wrath of God to make the grace of God glorious.** The grace of God is as magnificent as the wrath it addresses. The more clearly your congregation understands what the wrath of God is, settled, righteous, personal, present, and eternal, the more clearly they will understand what the grace of God did in providing the propitiation that absorbed it. Let the doctrine of wrath serve the proclamation of grace: not to diminish grace, but to give it its proper weight, its proper glory, and its proper urgency.
3. **Resist the cultural pressure to redefine or privatize divine wrath.** Every generation has its preferred strategy for softening the wrath of God. In ours, the dominant strategies are redefinition (impersonal moral consequences) and omission (simply not speaking of it). Identify which of these strategies most tempts you in your own communication of the gospel, and commit to the counter-discipline: regular, explicit, theologically precise declaration of the wrath of God as a personal, settled, righteous attribute of the holy God whose love is displayed supremely in addressing that wrath through the cross.
4. **Proclaim the urgency of the gospel with the urgency that the wrath of God demands.** John 3:36 declares that the wrath of God is not merely approaching but presently, continuously abiding on everyone who has not come to faith in the Son. This present-tense abiding is the ground of the missionary and evangelistic urgency of the church. The people around you are not merely heading toward a bad outcome; they are presently in a condition of being under the wrath of the holy God. Let that reality give your witness the urgency, the care, and the love-motivated boldness that it demands.
5. **Receive the propitiation with the depth of gratitude it deserves.** The propitiation of Christ is the most magnificent provision in the history of the universe. It absorbed the full weight of the settled, righteous, personal, eschatological wrath of the infinite God, and it did so voluntarily, lovingly, and with the full knowledge of every specific sin of every specific sinner it was accomplished to cover. Let the weight of what was borne at the cross, the wrath that was fully, finally, and permanently absorbed, produce in you the depth of gratitude, the quality of worship, and the consistency of obedience that such a propitiation deserves.

D. For Every Season of Life

For the new believer: First Thessalonians 1:10 describes Christians as those who “wait for His Son from heaven ... Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.” You have been rescued. The wrath that was your condition apart from Christ, the settled, righteous, personal wrath of the holy God that abided on you as on every person outside of faith in the Son, has been absorbed by the propitiation, and the verdict “not guilty” has been pronounced over you by the Judge of all the earth. Let the magnitude of what you have been rescued from be the measure of your gratitude for the One who rescued you.

For the long-tenured saint: The danger of long exposure to the gospel is the fading of the contrast, the loss of the vivid awareness of what grace has saved from, and therefore the loss of the depth of gratitude that only that awareness can produce. Return regularly to the doctrine of divine wrath. Let John 3:36, Revelation 6:16–17, and the description of divine judgment throughout both Testaments press upon your soul with their original weight. And then let the propitiation be received, again, with the wonder of one encountering it for the first time.

For the one who struggles to believe that God loves him: The cross is the definition and the demonstration of the love of God, and the cross is only fully comprehended against the backdrop of the wrath it absorbed. God demonstrated His love toward you, in that while you were yet a sinner, under His wrath, a child of wrath by nature, Christ died for you (Romans 5:8; Ephesians 2:3–4). The love is as large as the wrath it addressed. The grace is as magnificent as the condemnation it lifted. If God loved you enough to provide a propitiation for the wrath under which you stood, He will freely give you all things (Romans 8:32).

For the pastor and teacher: Lesson 18 closes Unit 5 on the communicable attributes with the attribute that is simultaneously the most neglected and the most urgently needed in our present cultural moment. Preach the wrath of God. Teach the wrath of God. Do not be ashamed of it, do not soften it, and do not separate it from the love of God that provides its resolution in the cross. The whole counsel of God includes both, and the faithfulness of your ministry will be measured, in part, by whether you declared both without flinching. The gospel is good news. Make sure your congregation knows why it is good news, and that means making sure they know what news it is good news in the face of.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Before studying this lesson, how would you have described your own comfort level with the doctrine of the wrath of God? Is it a doctrine you have regularly heard preached and taught, or one that has been largely absent from your theological formation? How has your understanding of it changed or deepened through this lesson? Share briefly with the group.

Observation Questions (What Does the Text Say?)

2. Read Romans 1:18–32. What is the specific cause of God’s wrath identified in verse 18? What does Paul mean by “suppressing the truth in unrighteousness”? What is the result of this suppression described in verses 21–23? What does the threefold repetition of “God gave them over” (vv. 24, 26, 28) declare about the character and the consequences of divine wrath?

3. Read John 3:31–36. What is the context of Jesus’ declaration in verse 36? What is the contrast between “believing in the Son” and “not obeying the Son”? What does the

word “abides” (*menō*) contribute to the description of God’s wrath? Why is this present-tense formulation pastorally significant?

4. Read Revelation 6:12–17. What is the context, what seal is being opened? Who are the people crying out in verses 15–16, and what are they asking for? What do they identify as the source of the judgment they are fleeing in verse 16? What is the theological significance of the phrase “the wrath of the Lamb”?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

5. Define divine wrath as settled, righteous, and personal. Why is each of these three adjectives necessary for an adequate definition? What specific distortions does each one guard against?

6. Explain the distinction between wrath as an attribute of God’s character and wrath as an occasional action of His governance. Why is the attribution of wrath to God’s character theologically necessary? How does the connection between holiness and wrath explain why wrath must be an attribute rather than merely an action?

7. The lesson argues that the wrath of God is not the opposite of His love but one of its expressions. How does the illustration of parental love and anger demonstrate this? How does the cross demonstrate that wrath and love are not competing but co-expressive?

8. What are the four primary strategies by which contemporary Christianity avoids the wrath of God? Why does each strategy ultimately undermine the gospel? What does the loss of divine wrath do specifically to the meaning and urgency of the atonement?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

9. Paul declares in Acts 20:27: “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.” In your own ministry of the Word, in preaching, teaching, or personal witness, have you been declaring the whole counsel, including the wrath of God? Where is your own tendency to “shrink” most acute, and what would faithfulness to the whole counsel demand of you specifically?

10. John 3:36 declares that the wrath of God presently “abides” on everyone who does not have faith in the Son. Think of the people in your life who do not have faith in Christ. How does the doctrine of the present, abiding wrath of God change the urgency of your witness to them? What would it look like to love them with the love that the full reality of their condition demands?

11. First Thessalonians 1:10 describes Christians as those who wait for the Son “who rescues us from the wrath to come.” In your own devotional and liturgical life, how regularly do you receive the propitiation of Christ with the depth of gratitude that the full reality of what it absorbed deserves? What practices, in prayer, in worship, in the Lord’s Supper, might deepen your reception of the grace that absorbed the wrath?

12. As we close Unit 5 on the communicable attributes of God, reflect on the full arc of Lessons 14 through 18: holiness, righteousness and justice, goodness and love and grace, omnipotence and sovereignty, and now wrath. How do these five lessons together paint the picture of the God whose character is the ground and the pattern of

the gospel? What is the single most transformative insight from Unit 5 that you carry into the Trinity lessons of Unit 6?

Prayer Focus

Open your prayer in the spirit of Revelation 6:17, not with terror, but with honest theological realism: Lord, apart from the propitiation of Your Son, none of us would be able to stand before the great day of Your wrath. The settled, righteous, personal, eschatological wrath of the holy God is the condition under which every human being exists outside of Christ. Acknowledge that before Him. Let the full weight of what Christ absorbed on your behalf settle upon you: the wrath that would have fallen on you, was poured out on Him.

Then receive the propitiation with the depth of gratitude it deserves: Lord, You displayed Christ publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. The wrath under which I stood has been absorbed. The verdict over me is not guilty. The grace that has been given is as great as the wrath that has been addressed. Thank the God who is simultaneously just and the justifier, who did not set aside His wrath to show His love, but satisfied His wrath in order to display His love in its most magnificent and most costly form.

Close by praying for those in your life who are presently, continuously, abidingly under the wrath of God that John 3:36 describes. Name them. Bring them before the God of the propitiation, the God whose patience is still extended, whose gospel is still proclaimed, and whose Spirit is still at work calling sinners to the only refuge that can save them from the wrath to come. Ask for boldness in your witness, love in your proclamation, and the urgency that the full reality of their condition demands. And close with the same doxology with which this entire series has been framed: For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com