

The Cup of Wrath

By Pastor Andy Aikens

*There is no one righteous, not even one;
there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.
All have turned away, they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good, not even one.*

- Apostle Paul, Romans 3:10-12

My father disciplined my brothers and me when we were children. I wasn't so certain then, but I am certain now that this was because he loved us. I remember a particular incident in which I lied to my mother. He confronted me about the matter, and I lied some more. His wrath flared. I deserved it. My rebellious heart would not allow me to come off the lie. This insult against my parents was high treason. I had disregarded their love and concern and consequently incurred their wrath. It was not until I was an adult, and my parents had long forgotten the matter, that I confessed how I wronged them.

As I reflect on that moment, it serves to illustrate the rightness of anger towards sin. Something is wrong with our moral compass if we are not angered by wrongdoing. How much more true this must be for God! Unlike our earthly fathers, our Heavenly Father always responds appropriately. He is perfect, and he has a righteous anger toward us because of our sinful, rebellious condition. And yet, if he treated us as our sins deserved, we would not be able to stand. How God is able to do that and remain holy is an awesome thing. He is able to be merciful to sinners and remain righteous because of the cross. Let's take a look and see how.

We have no basis for hope or confidence in this life or the life to come without the cross of Christ. The Bible makes this plain through what it has to say regarding *propitiation*. In its Biblical use, this verb turned noun, means "a sacrifice that appeases the wrath of God." This concept reveals the deep aspects of God's love and God's justice. Propitiation helps us see the true value of God because propitiation is the one Scriptural concept that simultaneously displays the mercy of God and the righteousness of God. By comprehending the work of the cross as propitiation, we gain an overwhelming sense that God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. The insight that propitiation brings to the cross gives us a high view of God's grace, and a high view of God's grace grants us a hope that makes each day worth getting up for.

After much searching I have discovered that there is one image that unveils the mysteries of propitiation better than any other. That image is *the cup of wrath*. Understanding the cup of wrath helps us view the cross in terms of God's complete character. The cup of wrath helps us not to neglect the Biblical motif of love or the Biblical motif of justice when considering the cross. The death of Jesus is not an act of sentimental love nor is it the work of a capricious wrath. Therefore, it cannot be explained in terms of mercy only, just as it cannot be explained in terms of wrath only. What we must comprehend is that if God were not righteous there would be no demand for Jesus to die. Conversely, if God were not loving, there would be no willingness for Jesus to die. Before we investigate the cup of wrath, let's look a little more at the concept of propitiation.

What is Biblical Propitiation?

The Apostle Paul and the Apostle John give us a two-sided view of propitiation. First, let's look at what the Apostle Paul says about propitiation and justice. Romans 3:23-26 says,

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 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; for the demonstration, I say, of his righteousness at the present time, that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

In describing the death of Christ, Paul says Jesus was displayed publicly as "a propitiation." He means by this that Jesus' death was the sacrifice that appeased the wrath of God. To understand Romans 3 you must comprehend the problem that is at hand. God cannot have fellowship with sin, and yet he is committed to having fellowship with man. Therefore, if this fellowship is to take place, the sin of man must be dealt with in a manner that satisfies the righteousness of God. God cannot ignore his law. He cannot act like a doting grandfather and pardon our sin without heed to the righteous requirements of that law. It is clear that, in our sin, we have transgressed God's law and thereby

fallen short of his righteous standards, which are described as his glory in Romans 3:23. God's wrath is God's righteous response to the transgression of his holiness.

The display of God's wrath towards sin is integral to a proper display of his holy character. God is never wrathful as the result of a capricious temper tantrum that is indicative of the pagan gods. God is holy, and his wrath flares up when that holiness is transgressed. As a result, this wrath is often referred to as a judicial wrath so as to distinguish it from a capricious wrath. This means that God's wrath is always consistent with his principles of righteousness that are laid out in Scripture. The awesome and amazing thing Paul is telling us in Romans 3 is that Jesus took this wrath in our place. Jesus satisfies the righteous demands of the law by becoming the sacrifice that appeases God's wrath and brings mercy to God's children.

So, that's the first side of propitiation. Paul's description of the death of Jesus in Romans 3 is helpful in leading us to understand the first facet of this beautiful diamond, which is related to God's justice. Now, let's turn to the second facet which is laid out by the Apostle John in 1 John 4:8-10,

“The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent his only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins.”

It is amazing that the apostle John roots the appeasing of God's wrath in the display of God's love.

The reason John is able to root the appeasement of God's wrath in the love of God is because God was under no obligation to redeem sinful man. God's holiness and man's universal guilt created a situation where God would have been equally righteous in choosing to destroy us or choosing to redeem us. However, once God commits himself to redeeming a people, he must deal with the issue of sin because God always acts in a way that is consistent with his holy character. Therefore, we have the message of 1 John 4:8-10. God's heart of love moved him to provide the sacrifice necessary to meet his own righteous demands. What an incredibly loving and just thing for him to do!

In light of this two-sided description of propitiation, the cross begins to make sense. For you must see, if God's justice does not demand the death of his Son, then the extreme suffering of Jesus feels like a gross overreaction. But, it is not a gross overreaction. Humanity has transgressed the holy law of a holy God. This is not a small thing. At the cross, Jesus became our substitute. We are the ones who deserved the punishment of God's wrath, but Jesus is the one who received that punishment on our behalf. This is the cup he drinks on the cross. If he does not drink this cup for you and me then we are cut off from God with no hope of ever getting to him. Jesus does this not because we are so great, but rather because he is so magnificent. The cross is not about the value of man; it is about the infinite worth of our just and loving God.

So, let's examine the meaning of the "cup of wrath" as used in Scripture so we can glean an even greater understanding of what the Bible means by *propitiation*. In order to do this, we will explore the following texts from the Gospel of Mark, which are linked together by the cup-drinking image: James' and John's request (Mark 10:35-40); Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42); and Jesus' death on the cross (Mark 15:33-39).

James' and John's Request: the Cross and the Cup

Mark 10:35-40 says,

³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

³⁶ "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

³⁷ They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

³⁸ "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

³⁹ "We can," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

In order to get to the cup, let's begin with the phrase, "in your glory" (v. 37). James and John were not thinking along the same lines as Jesus when they said, "in your glory." James and John probably had in mind a military procession accompanied by myriads of angels. However, Jesus had the cross in mind.

In verse 40 Jesus says, "to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared." So, who gets to sit there? Mark 15:25-27 answers, "It was the third hour when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS. They crucified two robbers with him, *one on his right and one on his left*" (emphasis mine). I believe these are the appointed seats that Jesus refers to in Mark 10:40. It has to be, because the cross is what Jesus had in mind when he referred to the drinking of the cup.

The transition from James' and John's question in verse 37, to Jesus' answer in verse 38, reveals much about glory and cup drinking. In order to understand this connection between glory and cup-drinking, we must look at Jeremiah 25:16, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: 'Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.'" Jeremiah 25:16 establishes the meaning of the cup as the cup of God's wrath. Mark 10:38-40 is referring to the same cup.

The prophecy of Jeremiah refers to the exile of Israel, and so, in one sense, this particular cup is drunk by the nations when Babylon conquers them. But, in another sense the death of Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of this text. The promise of judgment is realized in Israel's history, but it is not fully realized

until Christ hangs on the cross. Therefore, Jeremiah 25:16 sets the precedent for the cup imagery. When Jesus speaks of drinking a cup, he is referring to the cup of God's wrath. From a scriptural perspective it is the only cup he could have in mind. And, because Jesus links the suffering of the cross to this cup as he asks James and John if they can drink it, I am convinced that Jesus understands the event of the cross to be the cup of God's wrath.

In this passage of Scripture Jesus connects the event of coming in his glory with the event of drinking the cup of God's wrath. Drinking this cup, which is dying on the cross, is a display of Christ's glory because this one great act demonstrates that God is both loving and just. He is merciful and righteous. In this monumental sacrifice, Christ extends to humanity a grace that we neither deserve nor fully comprehend. This glory-magnifying grace becomes the source of all our comfort and confidence in this life. Any comfort apart from the cross constitutes only wishful thinking. Any confidence apart from the cross of Christ reveals only the worst form of arrogance. The glory-magnifying grace of the cross gives birth to all true worship and supplies the power for any effective witness. Any worship that is separated from the cross is idolatry, and any witness that is separated from the cross is impotence. Therefore, the cross must be understood in its fullest meaning. The cross of Christ magnifies God's justice, and it magnifies God's love.

Praying not to Drink the Cup

Because the cross is concerned with two very big themes, it ought to be clear that the cross is a weighty matter. No event in the life of Jesus captures this weight better than his prayer meeting in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane also uses the image of cup-drinking, and thereby instructs us about the meaning of the cross as well. In Gethsemane Jesus prays about drinking the cup, and consequently appears to be heavily burdened. Understanding that the cup he refers to is the cup of wrath helps me to grasp why he is so burdened. It is the profound weight of receiving his Father's wrath that causes him to wrestle so hard during this prayer.

In Mark 14:36 Jesus prays, "*Abba*, Father...everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." When Jesus bowed to pray in Gethsemane, his honesty with the Father was astounding. He actually prays for the cup to pass. When Jesus prays for the cup to pass, we get a glimpse of the difficulty he is facing in the cross. This painful ordeal that lies ahead of him is daunting.

In this prayer Jesus expresses a desire to not go through the cross event. He prays this way because he understands that the cross will be the full execution of God's judicial wrath towards the sin of his people. In the satisfaction of God's justice, Jesus will bear the full brunt of God's wrath toward sin on our behalf. His soul is burdened because as he approaches that moment in his life, he approaches the horrors of our sin and the reality of sin's punishment. There is a cup he must drink, and it is the cup of his Father's wrath.

These observations show us that the cross is more about God than it is about man. In order for men and women to experience sweet communion with God, like Adam did in the Garden of Eden, the issue of sin must be dealt with. Humanity has transgressed the law of God, and God's holy character will not allow him to simply ignore this. God must punish sin. He cannot simply sweep it under the rug of the universe and remain holy. Jesus knew this and it caused him great agony in the face of the cross. It caused him agony because he knew the cross was to be his Father's instrument for satisfying the demands of the divine law.

In this manner the cross perfectly displays God's love and God's justice. The agony of Christ in the garden of Gethsemane demonstrates the truth of this. He sweats drops of blood. The reality of Christ's own love for sinners, his deep devotion to the Father, and the earthshaking hand of discipline that he must endure on the cross produce this blood-sweating response. To de-emphasize either aspect of propitiation in the cross, that is its love or its justice, is to deny the power of the cross to redeem. The cross is not merely a display of love, nor is it merely a demonstration of justice, but rather through the presentation of both love and justice the cross becomes like a multifaceted diamond showing forth God's wisdom, holiness, power, mercy, wrath, goodness and righteousness. The cross magnificently puts these excellencies of our great God on display for the world to see.

Jesus Drinks the Cup

This leads us to our final text, Mark 15:33-39, 'the cry of desolation' and the death of Christ. It is at this moment that Christ drinks the cup of God's wrath and experiences the isolation of the execution of God's justice upon his body. Even though this text does not mention the cup, it is the event our other texts refer to and therefore demands attention.

In the moment of his crucifixion Jesus cries, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The Father does not abandon Jesus forever, but he does abandon him. He abandons him because in that moment of drinking the cup Jesus takes on our sin, and God is "of purer eyes than to behold evil" (Habakkuk 1:13).

The question on Christ's lips is often misunderstood. Was Jesus aware of why the Father abandoned him on the cross? Yes, Jesus is certainly aware of why God has forsaken him. All we need to do to demonstrate this is to return to Mark 10. By reading a little further, Mark 10:45 clarifies Christ's understanding of the cross, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Instead of insisting that Jesus is ignorant of the full implications of this moment in Mark 15 we need to understand his words in light of their source.

The cry of desolation is a quotation from Psalm 22. In this Psalm, David wants to know why God has taken so long to vindicate him. By the end of the psalm it is apparent that God has rescued David and the cry has turned into

praise. It makes a lot of sense for us to understand Jesus words as not only expressing the cry of Psalm 22 but also the confidence of Psalm 22.

Therefore, when Jesus asks, “why have you forsaken me?” He is asking, “How long will this last?” This question is crucial. For in this question we see the implication of all the texts that speak of Christ as bearing our sin:

Isaiah 53:6

⁶We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah 53:11b, 12

my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.
¹²Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,

John 1:29

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

2 Corinthians 5:21

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.

Galatians 3:13

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.”

Hebrews 9:28

so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

1 Peter 2:24

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

Now we see a little more clearly why Jesus cried out, “My God, my God.” He was bearing our sin. He was receiving the punishment that we deserved. As to the question regarding how long this suffering will last? Christ suffers in order

to make a full payment for our sin. He is not required to make an eternal payment, but he is required to make a complete payment.¹ In other words he does not have to suffer forever. Rather, he suffers fully, and once full payment is made, Christ's suffering comes to an end and "he will see the light of life and be satisfied" (Isaiah 53:11).

The Power and the Glory That Accompany the Cup

By way of conclusion, we will round out our exploration of the cup imagery by viewing the display of power that accompanies the drinking of the cup of God's wrath. Mark 15 holds two gems that help us wrap up our discussion regarding this image. These two gems are the two responses associated with the death of Christ. The first is the tearing of the temple curtain, and the second is the response of the centurion. These two displays of power and glory unveil the significance of the moment of Christ's death. This is no ordinary death; this is the glory of God on full display, a simultaneous magnification of God's love and God's justice.

Mark 15:38 is a single sentence that reads, "The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom." No explanation is offered. It appears that the author assumes you will get it. There is great theology in this simple sentence. It is also a sentence that evidences great power in the death of Christ. The power is evident in the fact that it happened, and the theology begins with the phrase, "from top to bottom."

¹ Grudem, Wayne. Systematic Theology. P. 576

No man could have torn this curtain with his bare hands, much less could a man tear it from the top. A man would have torn it from the bottom. The implication is that this is a divine event. The way the event is recorded leads the reader to believe that the tearing happens concurrently with verse 37. The picture is one of Jesus crying out from the cross, and at the same time the temple curtain opens up. The symbolism is clear. The temple curtain barred entrance to the presence of God. That entrance is now open through the death of Christ. Through Christ's sacrifice we have gained access to the glorious presence of God. What power! What grace!

And, that is not all. In the midst of this darkness and power, a pagan, Roman soldier stands at the foot of the cross. He witnesses this terrifying moment in the history of the world. His response is astounding. He hears the cry and he sees the Lord breathe his last. Then he says, "Surely this man was the Son of God." How did he know that? God revealed it to him in an overwhelming manner. God did not whisper it in his ear; he manifested it before his eyes in power and in glory. Darkness covered the whole land, this innocent man died in uncommon suffering of soul, and then the world shook as God ripped the temple curtain and produced a foretaste of the resurrection that was to come in a matter of days. The soldier knew this was no ordinary man, because he could see that he died in no ordinary manner.

On the cross of Calvary Jesus drinks the cup of God's wrath and we see God's glory. Like a sunbeam, a terrifying sunbeam, shining from the sun, God reveals himself by emanating his glory in the cross event. God is not obligated to

do this. God does not owe this to man. He desires to do it from a heart of love. But, once he purposes to redeem sinful man, he must do it through the cross. There is no other way. In order for God to be holy and loving, he must satisfy his own justice. He cannot ignore our sin. Therefore, in power and glory the Son of God gave his life as a ransom for many.

Application

If the gospel is to benefit sinful men and women, then it must point them to a holy as well as a loving God. For, the full-orbed understanding of God's justice and God's love in the gospel is the only medicine for our man-centered world. A high view of God's grace in the cross event heals us of our arrogance by granting us confidence in the Almighty Creator of the universe. A high view of the cross comforts our souls by giving us a place to run with the anxieties of life. The confidence and the comfort of a high view of the cross makes it possible to face each day without lying to ourselves about our own worth. Instead, we begin to live in the joy supplied by the ability to rejoice in an all-sufficient God who has bestowed his saving grace on undeserving sinners.

The medicine of a balanced presentation of both love and justice in the cross allows us to make much of the love of God without diminishing God's righteousness or wrath. By avoiding the tendency to overemphasize one or the other we will also avoid the danger of overemphasizing the value of mankind. As Christians we should never make so much of ourselves that we begin to think

that the root cause of God's saving action resided in our own worth rather than in God's magnificence and grace. When we use the gospel to exalt ourselves, it demonstrates a low view of the cross and a low view of grace. The tragedy of this reality is that we are robbed of the great joy of worship and the real power behind our witness. When we understand what God has done on the cross we will experience a greater rejoicing over God. When we understand what God has done on the cross we will experience a greater desire to tell others about this grace. Because, in the cross, Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath and thereby satisfied divine justice and extended divine love.

May God's love and God's justice take hold of your heart and grant you comfort and confidence. May that comfort and confidence enhance your worship and empower your witness.