

### **Welcome**

Have you ever heard of the Darwin Awards? They started on Usenet (which was the internet before there was internet) back in 1985 as a tongue-in-cheek way to recognize people who contributed to the human race by removing themselves from the gene pool. To be really specific: the Darwin Awards are stories of people who kill themselves by being dumb.

Just this past year, one award went to two Texas men who tried to jump an open drawbridge in Louisiana... the car didn't come close to making the jump, and the two men fell straight into the river below.

Another award went to a man in Maine who shot himself. Did you ever pull any teeth by tying a string around your tooth and then tying the other end to a doorknob? The idea is that you slam the door and it pulls the tooth out. Well this guy got the bright idea to Home Alone his house and boobytrapped his own closet with a handgun that would shoot - the trigger was hooked up to the same sort of mechanism as that tooth-puller.

You can guess what happened next, right? Yeah - he forgot. And he killed himself.

The Darwin Awards have been circulating for almost 40 years because they're a mixture of comedy and tragedy. It's awful that people died, but when it's because they made some really dumb decisions, well... it's the same reason we like to watch fail videos on YouTube - it's hard to feel 100% bad for someone who's the victim of their own choices.

We're going to talk about some big ideas today - specifically, how we reconcile God's love with God's wrath, and how that's all wrapped up in the Cross. As we're going to see that what's really good about Jesus' good news is that he shows us who God is - God is the one who saves us from ourselves.

### **Message**

This is the season of Epiphany, when we celebrate that the God who came to us at Christmas is not only for us, but for the whole world. This year, our Epiphany series is called "Church Words with Friends". We're going to be exploring some of those words Christians use that can be confusing. Maybe they're words like "Gospel" that are unique to Christianity. Or words like "grace" or "blessed" that pretty much everyone uses, but no one is exactly sure what they're supposed to mean. Our goal is to understand our faith better so that we can be better conversation partners with our friends and neighbors outside the Church.

And since friends are so nice, we're going to do two words each week. By learning these 'church words' together, we'll uncover new dimensions to our faith.

We began with God & Trinity, and discovered that when we say God is Trinity, we're saying God is most essentially self-giving love. God created us to join in giving ourselves in love to each other.

Then last week, we talked about Gospel and Incarnation and saw that what makes Jesus worthy of our worship, what proves he is a god worth following, is that he demonstrates his love by becoming one of us, giving up his divine privileges and sacrificing himself for us.

So today, we're going to explore the nature of that sacrifice. Our words for today are Wrath and Atonement. These are two words that intersect at the cross, where Jesus died for us. And I'm going to warn you up front: today we are doing some very heavy lifting. We're looking at a big, big concept - why Jesus died for us - that we've gotten very, very wrong. So we're going to be at 30,000 ft today, and I'm going to give you some homework to help you ground it this week.

I saw a debate once between a seminary professor and a Muslim Imam. During the debate, the Imam critiqued Christianity for our understanding of God's character. It's not good, he insisted, that God had to kill his son to forgive us. In Islam, we believe God can just choose to forgive us. After all, if I loan you \$5, and you come back to me and say you don't have the \$5, I don't have to punch my son. I can just say, "Don't worry about it."

His example was a bit glib, but he taps into a real problem a lot of people have when trying to understand the crucifixion: did Jesus die to appease God's wrath? The way we hear it is that God hates sin, and we're sinners. But Jesus took our sin on himself, so God poured out all God's wrath on Jesus (instead of on us). Jesus died, God was appeased and we all get to live happily ever after.

Except you don't have to sit very long with that view of God to get to where the Imam did: it seems frankly abusive. Why did God *have to* punish anyone? Why couldn't God just forgive?

The way some theologians and pastors explain this is by appealing to God's Wrath. God is holy and just, and therefore *must* punish sin, they say. Otherwise, God wouldn't be truly good.

Remember when I said we're hanging out at 30,000 ft today? Well here we go: We're going to look at how the Bible defines God's wrath and then look at three pictures of God's wrath to get clear on how God's Wrath could possibly be Good News.

[Scripture Slide 1] Turn with me to Romans 1. This is the opening of Paul's letter to Rome, and he's illustrating that, no matter where we come from, we all have the same need of God. I want to read just a couple of verses here where Paul hones in on God's wrath. Pay attention to how Paul defines wrath

**But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness... So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. -- Romans 1:18, 24**

According to Paul, God's wrath is what happens when God *gives us over* to whatever we want to do. God's wrath isn't giving us cancer or striking us with lightning bolts. God's wrath is *giving us what we want*.

That's... not what we expected. It doesn't comport with the pictures of God's wrath. But does it hold together with other images of God's wrath in the Bible?

[Scripture slide 2] Flip back to Genesis 7. This is one of the first pictures of God's wrath in the Bible - the Flood. You've heard the story - God flooded the world because humanity was so wicked.

When Noah was 600 years old, on the seventeenth day of the second month, all the underground waters erupted from the earth, and the rain fell in mighty torrents from the sky. -- Genesis 7:11 (NLT)

The New Living Translation has modernized the language, which removes the Hebrew metaphors. Here's the same verse in the New American Standard, which is the most literal English translation:

In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on the same day all the fountains of the great deep burst open, and the floodgates of the sky were opened. -- Genesis 7:11 (NASB)

[Cosmos] Notice two major things here: first, that the flood happens because the "fountains of the great deep" and the "floodgates of the sky" were opened. These point back to the Hebrew creation story in Genesis 1, where all creation begins as endless waters. After God creates light and dark on Day 1, God then creates a space inside the waters by establishing a firmament - a dome above and below. The Hebrews saw the world as sort of a reverse snow-globe, where the world existed inside a membrane, and water surrounded us above and below.

That's really different from our round ball suspended in an infinite abyss.

So the image of the flood for US is a bunch of clouds forming and raining until the whole ball is covered. But for the Hebrews, it was that the "fountains of the deep" and the "windows of Heaven" opened and the primal waters of chaos flooded into the space God had created on the second day of creation. Ancient Hebrews didn't see a world-wide flood as much as they saw an *unmaking of creation*.

The second thing to note is that all the language used here doesn't assign agency - the fountains burst open and the floodgates *were opened*. The imagery here is less God sending a flood than it is God removing God's creative and sustaining provision.

This is hard for us to see because we're children of the Enlightenment Deism. We think of the universe as more of a clock God made, wound up and let go. But ancient peoples saw God as creator and sustainer. Not only did God create the world, but the world continues to exist because of God's constant, consistent and loving provision.

And what Genesis shows us is a world where people don't want to partner with God in sustaining the world. People want to live in God's world on their own terms, to wage war and visit all manner of

violence on each other, to abuse the world, to consume without thought. What humanity is saying to God is what all of our sin says to God: I got this. I don't need to. Buzz off.

SO what we see in the Flood story isn't God throwing a tantrum and flooding the Earth. We see God giving us what we asked for - a world without God. God removes God's sustaining power.

What the Flood story really illustrates is the consequences of Sin - living without God. Sin unmakes the world. Sin is anti-life. That's why, a few verses later in Paul's letter to the Romans, he says, "The wages of Sin is Death." God is the author of life, the one who created us and knows what we need to flourish.

There's a Jewish curse that says, "May God give you what you want." This is the wages of sin.

Which brings us to the Cross. If God's wrath is not God smiting us, but rather God giving us what we want, then what do we make of Jesus dying on the cross? How does that *save* us?

Again, we have to stay up at 30,000 ft here (and don't worry, we'll dive back down into the weeds on this in a couple of weeks). For now, what we need to remember is that it matters that Jesus was crucified (not stabbed or stoned or any of the other methods of execution common in his day). Crucifixion was a specific, special way to execute, one that was as much propaganda as it was punishment. Crucifixion was designed to be a long, drawn out, brutal, bloody and very public punishment because it sent a message to everyone who saw it: Rome rules the world.

What God's people expected from their Messiah was a conquering war lord, someone who could defeat Rome for good, and establish God's rule in the world rather than Rome's. But what they couldn't see is that even if their Messiah beat Rome at Rome's game, it would *still be Rome's game*.

The Cross represents the ultimate form of human sin: Empire. It's what happens when the "my way not God's way" is played out on a global stage. The Cross represents God's wrath because it's what a world without God looks like - brutal, bloody and cut-throat. (And don't think the Caesars were immune - Roman history is as much about the fighting and betrayal within the empire as it is about Roman conquest).

So what we see on the Cross is *not* God punishing Jesus for our sin. Remember our discussion about the Trinity from a couple of weeks ago - the Trinity is indivisible. What one does, they all do. So the Cross is about Jesus saving us from ourselves, from the world we think we want.

Again, we're going to dive deeper into this in a couple of weeks, but what we see on the Cross is Jesus making a way for us to be reunited with God. As we saw last week, Jesus explodes all our fears and apprehensions about an angry, bearded, lightning-bolt-throwing god and shows us who God really is - the God who loves us and who rescues us *from ourselves* by giving Godself for us.

[Scripture Slide 3] That's what Atonement is really about - how we become one with God again, how Jesus restores our broken relationships. Turn to Hebrews 10. Hebrews is a sermon preached to Jewish Christians, so the preacher uses a lot of Temple and sacrificial imagery to explain Jesus' death and resurrection. For Jews, God lived in the Temple, behind a curtain. Only one person - the High Priest - could enter into that Holiest Place, and even then only once a year. They saw God as really dangerous - not unlike how many of us are scared of God today. So listen to how the preacher in Hebrews describes what Jesus did:

Dear brothers and sisters, we can boldly enter heaven's Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus. By his death, Jesus opened a new and life-giving way through the curtain into the Most Holy Place. And since we have a great High Priest who rules over God's house, let us go right into the presence of God with sincere hearts fully trusting him. For our guilty consciences have been sprinkled with Christ's blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water.

Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise. Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another. -- Hebrews 10:19-25

The preacher in Hebrews affirms God is good, God is love. God isn't dangerous - far from it. Because we know Jesus, we can approach with boldness. We can enter through the curtain into that holiest place and be united in perfect love with the one who created us and calls us and preserves us.

God's wrath is revealed when God gives us what we think we want - when God removes God's hand of sustaining Love and gives us over to our sin. Some of you know exactly what that feels like - to get what you want, and then to realize it's the worst thing that could've happened to you.

But God, in God's infinite mercy, does not abandon us to death in our sin. God became one of us and lived a life in perfect submission to God's way. God took on God's own back the weight of our sin on the Cross.

Atonement is about God saving us from ourselves and doing all the work to restore our relationship.

And as difficult as it is to wrap our brains around this truth, it's even harder to wrap our *hearts* around it. Maybe it's because we've grown up with the image of an angry God for so long, or maybe it's because we're aware of our own sinfulness, but it's hard to *believe* God really loves us.

### Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Which is why it's so important for us to approach the communion table today.

1. What do I feel is God's main posture toward me?
2. Where do I need to repent of behaviors God might be giving me over to?
3. How can I rest in God's love this week?

**Assignment + Blessing**

Meditation on God's love for us! Hebrews 10:19-25