

## **Chapter Three**

### **What Does God Have to Do With Us?**

In the last chapter, I explored several of God's traits that centered on his all-loving nature that hates evil. The natural question that logically follows is how and why this all-loving, evil hating God can have anything positive to do with humanity. People are selfish and immoral. We are and do the very things that God in his 100% purity abhors. Yet he does care about us. That is clear from his C.V. God is not on a seek and destroy mission against humanity. The majestic God is "mindful" of us and he "cares" for us (Ps. 8). How can that be? What does a moral and pure God have to do with us?

My analysis of God's C.V. on this point takes on a science bent. Some people excel in science and others run from it. Some lie in the middle and can take it or leave it. However, one doesn't have to be a rocket scientist to know some basics of science, although one may label as something else. One could call these basic truths, "laws of nature." Even less scientific, one might call them simply, "facts of life."

Three examples are relevant. First, if you drop a fork at dinner, you will need to bend over and pick it up from the floor. You never have to get a ladder to retrieve it from the ceiling. A scientist might be able to explain gravity in excruciating detail, but the rest of us know that nature is set up that way. We know it is a fact of life that when you drop something, it falls until stopped.

A second example is somewhat related. We live in a cause and effect world. We see that in the dropped fork. If I hold a fork in the air and let go, the fork will not remain where it was, it will react by falling. Cause and effect is found everywhere. On a more practical level, if I never exercise, I tire more quickly when calling on my body for something strenuous. If I were to put my hand into fire, it would burn. If I am at sea level and I heat water to 212 degrees Fahrenheit, it will begin to boil.

My third and final example is the consistency of these aspects of nature. I know that gravity is not changing constantly. When I drop a fork, I don't think, "Hmmm, I wonder if gravity worked this time? Or maybe it quit working and the fork flew up to the ceiling!" I don't think that constant overeating while lounging on the sofa will suddenly make me a world class athlete.

Yes, we can try to think of exceptions. Maybe if I run my hand through a flame, my hand didn't burn, but that is because of another law of nature intervening,

namely my hand never stayed in contact with the flame in a way that conveyed the heat source. Laws of nature are consistent facts of life. That is why they are called “laws of nature.”

I use these principles to help understand God because God wrote nature. Regardless of where one lands on the issue of *how* God made the cosmos, whether in a big bang that settled into what we have today, in six ages, six 24-hour periods, or some combination of the above, we know that God set the dials for the cosmos. Nature is what God chose to express it to be. The elements, particles, sub particles, and more are what God determined, they weigh and have the mass set by God. Nature’s laws are from God, but they are more than even that.

Paul explained in his letter to the church at Rome that,

[God’s] invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made (Rom. 1:20).

Paul knew that the laws of nature themselves demonstrate qualities and aspects of the God who made them.

Consider in this light, the laws I used as examples at the start of this chapter. The law of gravity and the law of cause and effect can be considered together. Both of them are inherent both in who God is and in how our lives are affected by this truth. Cause and effect exist within God’s nature.

One sees this within the larger context of what Paul wrote in Romans. The quotation I wrote out above is embedded in Paul explaining that a cause and effect relationship exists between God and sin. Paul explained that,

the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (Rom. 1:18).

The holy pure God, the moral and just God, does not truck with sin. He never has, and never will. He *can’t*. Partnering with sin is contrary to his nature. This fact is a consistent unchanging truth. It is the moral cause and effect fact. God cannot and will not leave sin to fester and grow. God won’t promote sin. He will destroy it.

Paul added in his narrative that even those humans that were not graced with God’s revelation should know this and, therefore, have no excuse before him. Those

people who didn't have God's word still lived in the nature God established. Nature demonstrates the laws and rules of cause and effect. Such laws express the truths of God's nature. For this reason, Paul explained, people are "without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). People can see God and his characteristics in this world, people are hard-wired for morality yet walk immorally, people know right and wrong and at times chose the wrong – these people rightly incur God's wrath.

Paul explained that in this life, our sin leads us deeper into sin. This is a fact of life. It is a reason God abhors sin and brings his wrath on it. Sin does not make us better, it is inherently destructive. Sin might offer a moment of pleasure or respite. Sinning might seem at times the easiest course of action, but as inevitably as a fork falls when dropped, sin leads to bad results. Paul said that refusing to follow God's righteous ways resulted in people being,

filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless (Rom. 1:29-31).

This destructive path of immorality doesn't stop in this life. It properly leads to ultimate eternal destruction as well.

Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them (Rom. 1:32).

Now one might wish things were otherwise. One might think that when it comes to morality, sin, and evil, that God could wave his God wand in some Harry Potter way and make himself and the world differently. One might think that God could look deep into our hearts, know that we are immoral and sinful, but then let his love trump his purity, and he could just overlook our errors. In other words, the world might be sick, but for the nice people, God could make those folks well.

The problem with that thinking is that we don't live in a Harry Potter world. We live in a world of laws. We have laws of nature. We have laws of physics (law of the "physical" world). God can suspend the physical laws of nature (the virgin birth and Jesus' physical resurrection being two obvious examples). As the author of the universe, God is entitled to do so at his pleasure. But God cannot suspend his

own nature and character. The unchanging God cannot become one who approves or accepts evil. It isn't who he is.

This truth sets up the problem of humanity interfacing with God's loving nature and God's justice on evil. A solution is needed lest all humanity extinguish.

### **The Meeting Place**

The heart of the Christian faith is found in the cross of Christ. Some consider the Christian faith an expression of good morality, turning the other cheek and loving your neighbor. Yes, that is a part of the Christian faith, but it isn't the core. Some consider the Christian faith a nice way to think of God and the universe as good and loving. Christianity does teach that God is love, but the faith also recognizes and embraces a God of wrath and vengeance on that he hates. The Christian faith finds its fullest truth in the meeting place between God's love and his wrath.

I write this as a trial lawyer. For over three decades I have made my living in courtrooms around the nation, seeking justice on behalf of clients. I am familiar with legal terminology. It is my bread and butter. For this reason, it is almost second nature for me to understand the cross of Christ in legal terms. Fortunately, legal terms are used consistently in the Bible to explain this very concept.

American courtrooms are not an invention of America. They are the evolved outgrowth of society seeking to find and enforce justice. Justice is an ancient concept built into the warp and woof of life. God's earliest written revelation in Scripture came on Mount Sinai where God himself wrote the expression of "law" we know as the Ten Commandments. God delivered to Moses the "law" (*"torah"* in Hebrew). Societies outside of Israel had "law." Not only societies, but even on an individual level life is live by a moral code. Law is part of who we are.

Justice is the societal equivalent of morality having cause and effect. We understand that it is morally wrong to kill someone, absent extenuating circumstances. Therefore, if someone is believed to have committed such a moral atrocity, "justice" demands that we find and punish him or her.

Justice is righteous. Righteousness is just. Those words are used in our language and we do well if we see at their roots, they express the same idea.<sup>1</sup> Justice is founded in righteousness. Righteousness forms the basis of justice. In justice courts, we seek what is right.

How does justice interplay with the cosmic moral situation? The unchanging, all-loving God is a “just” God, a “righteous” God. In his interactions with humanity and sin, he *must* conduct himself in a righteous and just fashion. It is his nature. It is who he is. The issue of humanity having an eternal existence with a morally perfect and just God finds its expression in law. God gave humanity law as an expression of moral cause and effect. Law is the human expression of a concept that is eternal and found in the essence of God. No one should be surprised, therefore, that this moral cause and effect concept of “law” is one we find in God’s interactions with humanity and human sin.

Law is the justice that exists in the wrath that God brings on sin. Consider these cause and effect passages where sin is the cause and God’s wrath is the effect:

- If Israel decided to violate God’s moral code on how to treat the less fortunate [the “cause”], God’s wrath will burn hot with the consequences [the “effect”].

“If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless” (Ex. 22:23-24).

- When Israel sinned making the idolatrous golden calf in defiance of the God who redeemed them from pharaoh and Egypt [the “cause”], God expressed the response of his pure and just nature in destroying them [the “effect”].

“And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I

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<sup>1</sup> In the Greek language, the words for “justice” and “righteousness” are built on the same family of word – *dikē* (δικη). We use different words in English because our language has developed from Latin and Germanic roots. From Latin (*ius*) English evolved with words of “just” and “justice.” From Germanic roots came the English words of “right” and “righteous.” The Greek root of *dikē* also contained the ideas of “punishment,” a term that goes hand-in-hand with justice.

may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you” (Ex. 32:9-10).

- Wrath over sin isn't just a concept found in the Old Testament. It is a central truth of God's character. It is the just destruction of evil appropriate with a cause and effect God. Jesus made the point clear as found in the teachings of the apostle John who commented on the famous passage of John 3:16. In John 3:16-17, Jesus said that,

“God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Then in commenting on this, John added the important point that God wasn't suddenly wrathful on those who wouldn't accept Jesus in faith. God's wrath was the natural cause and effect of sinfulness. His wrath was *already upon sinful humanity*. Jesus was simply the way out!

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God *remains* on him” (John 3:36).

As these ideas are considered, one rightfully examines why Jesus becomes the answer to God's sin. This reason is the core of the Christian faith I set out at the beginning of this chapter. Jesus was morally perfect. Jesus had no sin for which God's wrath could and should rightfully punish and destroy. This made Jesus a vessel that was righteous able to take on the sins of others and the wrath and death that rightfully came upon that sin.

In courtroom terminology, Jesus was able to pay the sentence that was justly assessed to others because Jesus had no penalty that could or would be assigned to himself. Furthermore, because Jesus himself was pure and sin-free, although he assumed the price of humanity's sin, justice also dictated that Jesus would live again.

The death of Jesus as a substitution for my death and that of other sinful creatures meets God's justice. In the death of Jesus on my behalf, the consequences of my sin are truly paid. There is no Harry Potter magic expressed in some moral waive of God's wand. There is true and just wrath poured upon sin.

Scripture teaches this core truth through a number of expressions, driving home the point forcefully. In the gospels, one reads of God's wrath on the events surrounding the cross. In Paul's epistles, legal imagery is used over and over to express God's judgment on sin and the sinner as well as the righteousness of the atonement in Jesus. Paul and the writer of Hebrews use the Old Testament picture of Jesus as the "mercy seat" who is the meeting place of God's wrath and forgiveness for God's people. In the Revelation, one reads of the sacrifice of Jesus as an eternal consequence that enables not only God's people to be in harmony with the Lord, but also judgment to issue forth destruction on sin that isn't covered by the sacrifice of Christ. Each of these expressions are rightfully considered.

### *God's wrath at the cross*

As Jesus prepared for the crucifixion, he went to the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives to spend time communing with God in prayer. He had finally reached the core of his mission on earth. He prepared not only to die, but to die with the sins of the world on his shoulders. He prepared to incur the wrath of God that falls fully and righteously on sin and sinners.

Several passages of Scripture give a glimpse into the depths of what was happening on a cosmic and eternal scale. The fullness of what Jesus went through, no human can grasp. But several texts and events give a good scratch of the surface of this monumental and inconceivable defining moment for humanity.

Consider the way Luke reported the events.

And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground (Lk. 22:41-44).

Some read this and are a bit taken aback. Throughout history at times the courageous have given their lives for others. I know that I wouldn't blink twice if I could save the lives of my wife and children by giving my own. I wouldn't enjoy it, I suspect, but I would do it in a heartbeat. Many have nobly made this ultimate sacrifice for others. Yet Jesus, the Son of God, seems to be in particular agony and, by some people's rendering of this passage, even hesitant, looking for another way out.

Any such reading of the passage isn't fair. Jesus was born for this moment. This was his mission. Jesus had told his apostles and followers that he was going to Jerusalem to die. When Peter challenged him on it, Jesus set Peter straight immediately!

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." (Mt. 16:21-23).

What Jesus was set to endure was no ordinary death. Jesus was going to bear the wrath of God upon all the sin in history. Look at the unusual phrase where Jesus prays, "if you are willing, remove this cup from me." The "cup" of God associated with sin is found in the Jesus' Bible, what we today call the "Old Testament." Consider these passages:

- The Psalms speak of God's judgment on sin using the metaphor of God's cup of judgment.

"Let him rain coals on the wicked; fire and sulfur and a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup" (Ps. 11:6).

"For in the hand of the LORD there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed, and he pours out from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs" (Ps. 75:8).

- Isaiah spoke prophetically of judgment when writing of those who would drink the cup of God's wrath. Isaiah then promised that God would remove that cup from the people taking it unto himself.

"Wake yourself, wake yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl, the cup of staggering" (Is. 51:17).

“Thus says your Lord, the LORD, your God who pleads the cause of his people: “Behold, I have taken from your hand the cup of staggering; the bowl of my wrath you shall drink no more (Is. 51:22).

Ezekiel calls it the “cup of horror and desolation” (Ezek. 23:33). Habakkuk wrote of the cup of “utter shame” that would come upon “your glory” (Hab. 2:16).

This is the cup that Jesus was set to drink. Jesus was taking on God’s judgment. Where would that leave? What would happen to Jesus? Jesus as human didn’t know all of those answers.<sup>2</sup> Jesus was left trusting that to God. Jesus’ prayer was that God would remove the wrath. But what would happen and how, in a cosmic sense, Jesus entrusted to God in faith. The writer of Hebrews was very cognizant of the role that the faith of Jesus played in his willing submission at the cross, urging believers to be,

looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross (Heb. 12:2).

Jesus wasn’t scared and sweating like great drops of blood simply because he was going to die. He was taking on sins’ greatest and truest curse. He was fulfilling and meeting God’s eternal justice. Lesslie Newbigin points out a poignant contrast here.

[T]he Son of God, the Word of God made flesh, kneels in the garden of Gethsemane. He wrestles in prayer. His sweat falls like great drops of blood. He cries out in agony: “Not my will, but thine be done”. That is what it costs God to deal with man’s sin. To create the heavens and the earth costs him no labour, no anguish; to take away the sin of the world costs him his own life-blood.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> One must be careful not to think that Jesus the incarnate God had all the knowledge he holds as God in heaven. Paul wrote of Jesus as God “emptying himself” when he became human (Phil. 2:5-7). Jesus indicated he wasn’t omniscient as a human. Speaking of when his second coming would occur, Jesus explained, “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Mt. 24:36).

<sup>3</sup> Newbigin, Lesslie, *Sin and Salvation*, (Wipf & Stock 1956), at 36.

Perhaps the clearest indication of God's putting his wrath for our sins upon Jesus is found in Jesus fulfilling the prophetic message of the "Suffering Servant" found in Isaiah 53.

*To be continued....*