

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Website: [www.churchredeemeraz.org](http://www.churchredeemeraz.org)

Series: True Spirituality  
Number: 8  
Text: Romans 1:19-23  
Date: March 15, 2009 (a.m.)

Pastor/Teacher  
Gary L. W. Johnson

### ***THE SHACK, IDOLATRY AND AN ANGRY GOD***

The author of the run away best seller *The Shack*, William P. Young, recently gave an interview and categorically stated that he rejects any notion of a penal substitutionary atonement.<sup>1</sup> *The Shack's* doctrine of the atonement is designed to secure cosmic forgiveness for *all* creatures (human and angelic). In the book, "Papa," who is God the Father incarnated as a big African woman, says "Honey, you asked me what Jesus accomplished on the cross; so now listen to me carefully: through his death and resurrection, I am now fully reconciled to the world." "The whole world? You mean those who believe in you, right?" "The whole world, Mack. All I am telling you is that reconciliation is a two way street, and I have done my part, totally, completely, finally. It is not the nature of love to force a relationship but it is the nature of love to open the way" (p. 119). As noted last week, it comes as no surprise to discover that rejection of the doctrine of penal substitution goes hand in hand with the acceptance of some form of universalism, i.e., there is salvation for all. Reconciliation, according to the "God" of *The Shack* is universal. "Those who love me come from every stream that exists. They were Buddhists or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans and many who don't vote or are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions." Mack asks for clarification. "Does that mean...that all roads will lead to you?" "'Not at all,' smiled Jesus...'Most roads don't lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you'" (p. 182). The "God" of *The Shack*, turns out to be the figment of William Young's imagination and as such is an idol. Young doesn't like the Biblical picture of God, especially any concept of God's wrath and judgment, so he makes up his own. This is the essence of idolatry. This is exactly the way Paul describes idolatry in our text. Lloyd-Jones observed, "Now that is the attitude of mankind towards God. They consider God. They are the judges, you see, and God is a subject for examination! 'Ah, yes,' they say, 'very interesting, now let us see about this God! You say you believe in Him . . .' and so on. They are going to test Him, and having done so, and in spite of this full knowledge which He has given in the ways that we have seen, they decide that they are not interested, it is not worth while to bother any longer about God! The Apostle Paul wrote this, remember, nineteen hundred years ago, but you see what a perfect description it is of mankind today. How interesting to have a discussion about religion and to talk about God! Should God do this or should He not do that, and what I think about God! They examine God and reject Him. 'They did not like to retain God in their knowledge.' What an appalling statement! What a terrible condition! That is the state of mankind; they did not think it worthwhile to retain God in their knowledge; they deliberately put Him on one side. And man in sin is doing this still."<sup>2</sup> The Bible was not written to make us feel good about ourselves. On the contrary, it confronts us with very grim situations—we are sinners deserving and under the righteous wrath of a holy God. We should never seek to obscure this truth from people in our efforts to evangelize. "The Word of God," wrote Gerhard Ebeling, "always comes as *ADVERSARIUS NOSTER*, our adversary. It does not simply confirm and strengthen us in what we think we are, and what we wish to be taken for...this is the way, the only way, in which the Word draws us into concord and peace with God."<sup>3</sup> God's wrath is his

response to sin, relational and illicit, in all its expressions. This is stated in a sweeping and emphatic fashion in Romans 1:18: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men,” setting the tone for the lengthy treatment of the universal sway of sin that follows in Romans 1:18-3:20. In order to be clear on Paul’s understanding of sin, particularly its consequences, it is essential to be clear on his understanding of divine wrath or anger. Well over a century ago, George Smeaton wrote, “The question of divine wrath is at present the great point in debate on the subject of the atonement.”<sup>4</sup> That observation continues true to the present, and nowhere more so than for the teaching of Paul. Influential in the current debate has been the view of C. H. Dodd that Paul speaks of God’s wrath “not to describe the attitude of God to man, but to describe the inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe.” *The Shack* follows suit. This “God” says repeatedly He is particularly fond of all people, when God claims that He has forgiven all sins against Him (e.g. 118-119), that He does not “do humiliation, or guilt, or condemnation” (p. 223) and, contrary to large hunks of Scripture, God is not a God of judgment. “I don’t need to punish people for sin, sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It’s not my purpose to punish it; it’s my job to cure it” (p. 120). This reduces wrath to an impersonal process, “a purely immanent causal connection between guilt and retribution.”<sup>5</sup> If for no other reason, this view is deficient because it hardly does justice to Paul’s vigorously active language, “being revealed from heaven” (Rom. 1:18). Much more widespread are views being advanced by professing evangelicals. Typical is the notion that his wrath is “God’s allowing people to experience the intrinsic consequences of their refusal to live in relation with him.”<sup>6</sup> According to another recent expression, God’s wrath, both present and future, is his “handing people over to experience the consequences of the sin they choose.”<sup>7</sup> Clark Pinnock, the leading spokesman for this kind of evangelicalism speaks of sin as primarily refusing God’s love and since love defines God then “wrath” is God manifesting Himself as a spurned lover who seeks to overcome human sin by demonstrating His love through His wrath!<sup>8</sup> More seriously is the view being promoted by N. T. Wright who defines justification as the badge of covenant membership. The whole coherency of justification as meeting the problem of the wrath of God against sin, and therefore as being absolutely grounded in the substitutionary atonement by Christ which diverts that wrath from us, is lost or obscured in the membership interpretation. These things may not yet be denied by Wright, but there is no intrinsic connection between them and justification.<sup>9</sup> Now it is certainly true that sin has consequences, expressed, for instance, in Romans 1:24, 26-31, in effect the negative counterpart of “virtue is its own reward”; sin is its own punishment. But this view is deficient in what it denies, often emphatically. It is intent on excluding from God’s wrath any affective or emotional aspect and, with the exclusion, denying that it is punitive or retributive in any extrinsic or reactive way that goes beyond leaving sinners to the natural and inherent effects of their sin.

## I. REASONS FOR GOD’S WRATH

Because we take sin lightly, we are, therefore, offended when we hear about God’s wrath. Simply put—we don’t think God should be angry over our sin. Note this well. God *never* judges unless judgment is deserved. In Romans 1:19-23 Paul will give us *four* specific reasons for God manifesting His wrath.

### A. The Revelation of Creation

The “because” of verse 19 is connected with the last clause of verse 18. This tells us the reason for Paul affirming the judgment of God on men for suppressing the truth, which God has clearly made known to them. God has, as it were, left his footprints and fingerprints all over creation. This revelatory knowledge is *not* redemptive. “It serves simply the negative purpose and function of preserving man’s responsibility before God, because it heightens the conviction of sin and brings to consciousness the state of inexcusability.”<sup>10</sup> Creation is to serve as a glorious theater of God’s majesty and splendor. Likewise, man, created in the image of God, carries about within him an innate knowledge of the Creator. This inner

witness or monitor (the conscience) serves primarily a negative purpose of alerting fallen mankind to the foreboding sense that something is wrong.

B. The Rejection of the Knowledge of God

Men have turned away from what God has made known to them in creation. They are, therefore, indicted for failing to glorify the living and true God. Man was created for this purpose and is guilty of failing to glorify God (cf. Leviticus 10:3; I Chronicles 16:24-29; Psalm 148; Isaiah 48:1-11; Romans 15:5-6; Revelation 4:11). Because of this, they are also *thankless* and their foolish hearts are plunged into darkness.

C. The Rationalization of Fallen Mankind

Truth and light go together as does sin and darkness. When men reject the truth they demonstrate only foolishness. The word translated “fool” in verse 22 is *MORANTHENAI*. It is a very strong word, surpassing even *ASYNETOS* (translated *foolish* heart in verse 21). The noted German scholar, Adolf Schlatter, captured the essence of this when he wrote, “The inability to grasp and understand results in the conjuring up of flights of fancy and impossible goals that are groundless and detached from reality.”<sup>11</sup>

D. The Religious Inventions of Man

Look around today at the religions that capture the allegiance of men. “Paul’s only standard for measuring religions is the longing for the truth. His only question is: What do people say about God? Whatever they are seeking for themselves by means of their religious acts, namely, to secure and increase their happiness, to atone for their guilt, and to gain for themselves the assistance of the deity, all of this is put aside. The individual is godless if he fabricates religion in his own interest, for the sake of his own happiness. God must be worshipped for the sake of God. With this rule Paul proved to be fully obedient as a disciple of Jesus.”<sup>12</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Evangelicals” writes Melvin Tinker, “have been far more influenced by non-Christian ideas than is realized, often in a subtle fashion. They have perhaps unconsciously adopted certain ways of thinking, values and attitudes which originate not so much from the Word of God but from the World which stands in opposition to God, although such ideas may be given a Christian guise.”<sup>13</sup> *The Shack* is a tragic example of this very thing. The “God” of *The Shack* has been completely manufactured by the author to conform to the likes and dislikes of our surrounding postmodern culture. This “God” stands in stark contrast to the God of the Bible. The Apostle Paul declared “God’s wrath (both present and future) comes on those who are disobedient” (Eph. 5:6), not as somehow consisting in that disobedience or being left to its various perverse expressions (Eph. 5:3-6), but “because of such things”. Wrath here is distinct from these things; it is God’s response to (“because of”) them, his (surely personal) reaction against them, provoked by them. On its negative side, it involves exclusion from “any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God” (Eph. 5:5), an exclusion that, in view of its terms, deprivation of eschatological beatitude, is surely the punitive payback for sin.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, God’s wrath will result, on “the day of the Lord,” in “sudden destruction” coming upon the unrepentant (I Thess. 5:2-3, 9). The Apostle Paul refers to the wrath of God *ten* times in this epistle (1:18; 2:5, 8; 3:5; 4:15; 5:9; 9:22; 12:19; 13:4, 5). Contrary to William Young and his “God”, Paul obviously considers it an important element in understanding the Gospel. The “God of *The Shack* is an idol and idolaters resemble the idols they worship (cf. Ps. 115:8). Geerhardus Vos in his masterful treatment on the subject of idolatry in the O.T. writes in reference to the book of Isaiah, “In the same way idolatry is a caricature of religion in general, highly dishonouring to God. ‘Their land is full of idols; they worship the work of their own hands, that which their own fingers have made’ [2.8]. That God’s people are capable of exchanging the living God for something lifeless, manufactured by themselves, appears to the prophet the height of irreverence and irreligion. Subjectively the

offensive feature of this kind of sin consists in its humiliating, degrading influence upon man [2.9]. The true greatness of man consists in the service of Jehovah; this being abandoned for idolatry, a universal abasement takes place. The idols are to the prophet's view the opposite of all Jehovah stands for. As Jehovah is the Holy One, so the idols contract, as it were, a sort of positive unholiness; they are to be defiled, to be dishonoured [30.22].<sup>15</sup>

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> This is available at <http://www.rock-life.com/files/shakcomp.mp3>.

<sup>2</sup> D.M. Lloyd-Jones, Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 1, The Gospel of God (Eerdmans, 1985) p. 383. C. S. Lewis made a similar observation. "The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defence for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock." Cf. his, God In The Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics (Eerdmans, 1970) p. 244.

<sup>3</sup> G. Ebeling, Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language (Collins, 1963), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> George Smeaton, The Apostle's Doctrine of the Atonement (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> C. H. Dodd, The Epistle of Paul to the Romans (Harper & Row, 1932), p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> S. H. Davis, "Christ as Bearer of Divine Judgment in Paul," in Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ eds. J. B. Green and M. Turner (Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 338, 345.

<sup>7</sup> J. B. Green and M. Baker, Recovering The Scandal of The Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts (IVP, 2000), p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> C. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness (Baker, 2001), p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the critique by C. E. Hill, "N. T. Wright on Justification" IJIM Magazine Online (Vol. 3, no. 22), May 28 to June 3, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> S. Lewis Johnson, Romans (Believers Bible Bulletin, 1980), Lesson 3, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> A. Schlatter, Romans: The Righteousness of God (Hendrickson, 1995), p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> M. Tinker, Evangelical Concerns: Rediscovering the Christian Mind on Jesus Facing the Church Today (Mentor, 2001) p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> R. Gaffin, "Atonement In The Pauline Corpus: The Scandal of the Cross" in The Glory of the Atonement eds. C. E. Hill and F. A. James III, (IVP, 2004), p. 151. I am indebted to Dr. Gaffin, one of my professors at Westminster Theological Seminary, for his analysis of our contemporary problems relating to the wrath of God.

<sup>15</sup> G. Vos, Biblical Theology (Eerdmans, 1948) p. 279.