

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Wrath and love: Exploring the character of God

As we seek to be more fully equipped to engage the questions of our day, it is incumbent upon us to examine what the Bible teaches us about the real character of God. We should not allow ourselves to be satisfied with characterizations of God presented by others.

We live in a postmodern culture filled with lost people who have exchanged the exclusive claim of God, their Creator, for the lies of pluralism where all religious ideas are put on a par with one another. In that context, the claim of a Christ who declares Himself to be *the Way* to the Father is dismissed as unloving when, in fact He Himself is love in flesh.

We seek to share the good news of Jesus Christ in the midst of a generation that has bought the lie “there is no truth,” and yet we proclaim a Christ who declares Himself to be *the Truth*.

We live in a culture of death and yet we proclaim a Christ who declares Himself to be Life itself. As the saints of this day, charged with sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ, how shall we share the One who alone is *the Way* and *the Truth* and *the Life*?

This equipping section takes up the challenge by exploring one of the great conversations of God’s character: His wrath and His Love.

There was a time when you could enter into an evangelistic conversation with another person on the street because you shared a common worldview that there is a God, He is the Creator, we are created; He is perfect, we are not; we have sinned and God alone can fix our sin problem. You would then introduce them to Jesus who provides the solution (the atoning sacrifice, the all sufficient propitiation, the One who is reconciling love), invite them to receive the free gift of God’s amazing grace in Jesus Christ, pray the sinner’s prayer and invite them to join the fellowship of God’s people who gather at church. This approach to evangelism no longer “works” because we not only confront a sin chasm (bridged by Jesus), we also confront a culture chasm that must be bridged by thoughtful and careful apologetics.

Think of it as pre-evangelism: Answering the real questions people are asking before we present the One who is the answer to the question that they are not yet asking.

You might be asked, “How could you believe in a God whose overarching plan for the world included, by necessity, making His own Son suffer and die?” That is an invitation to a conversation about God’s wrath and God’s love.

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Week I: Recognizing that God is perfectly holy and therefore, perfectly just

The beginning of the conversation is to arrive at the suspension of disbelief in the reality of God. Can you get the person with whom you are speaking to suspend their disbelief and agree that for the purposes of this conversation, there is a God? The next step is to share with them that all your proof, all your evidence, is going to come directly from the Bible. Why? Because it is God's revelation about Himself. We cannot know the character of God without knowing what God has said about Himself.

Beginning at the beginning, we discover that God is real and God is personal. You cannot see God, but you can have a relationship with God. Adam did. Abraham did. Moses did. Wander around the stories your friend has heard or may know something about. Noah continues to have some cultural recognition. People have heard of David and Goliath. Use those cultural touch points to help your friend find a way to grasp the personal nature of God. God talked with these people. God instructed them. God enabled them to participate in His plan.

At each turn, you are seeking to assist your friend in seeing that God is the main character in the drama of history. God has a character and God has a will.

Being God, God is perfect. That's what it means to be God. If God were not perfect, then God would, by definition, not be God. That means that whatever God's character traits, God is fully, completely and perfectly manifesting those traits at all times and in all ways. Let's start with three things the Bible teaches us about God's character: God is holy, God is love and God is just.

The question we started with, "How could I believe in a God whose overarching plan for the world included, by necessity, making His own Son suffer and die?" is answered by my recognition of the very character of God who is at once perfectly holy, perfectly love and perfectly just. Jesus' very life and death demonstrate perfectly each of those character traits. But to see how that's true, we must also have a conversation about our character. Because although God is perfect and perfectly holy, we are not.

Questions for reflection and conversation:

1. Do you know someone that struggles with questions about the reality of God, the veracity of God's Word, the faithfulness of God's character or the nature of God's plan in Jesus Christ for salvation?
2. How are you praying for that person?
3. How are you preparing yourself daily for the next divine appointment God sets for you to be His witness to that person?
4. What questions do you have about God?

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Your feedback is greatly appreciated as future equipping studies are planned.

Share your comments with Carmen Fowler LaBerge via e-mail at cfowler@layman.org, call 1-800-368-0110 or write her at P.O. 2210, Lenoir, NC 28645.

Preparing your heart and mind to engage with unbelievers in conversations about God, Jesus, the Bible, sin, salvation and life takes prayer, study, a genuine love for lost people and role-playing some conversations with other Christians who are committed to helping you be more fully equipped for the work God has prepared in advance for you today. There are excellent resources in apologetics available online at: www.ColsonCenter.org and for families with children at www.summit.org. If you want to understand the post-modern challenges of presenting the Gospel today, read *Un-Christian* and *You Lost Me* by David Kinnaman of The Barna Group (www.barna.org).

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Week II: Recognizing that we are imperfect and therefore worthy of judgment

Your unbelieving friend will easily admit that we are not perfect. No one is. Ah! Therein lies the opportunity. In point of fact, Jesus is perfect. How? Because Jesus is God. This opens the door of opportunity for a conversation about the incarnation, but you will have to judge whether or not your friend is ready for that. You may need to simply say something like, “OK, let’s put the ‘Jesus is perfect because Jesus is God, even though He’s also human’ discussion on the shelf for another day. Today we’re talking about the reality of our imperfection. Can we agree that neither of us is perfect?” In the Bible, the pervasive and persistent reality of human imperfection is called “sin.” God created humanity in perfection, but through our own will we have chosen to go our own way, and that has led us into the mess we’re in.

Remember now, God is perfectly holy. That means that God cannot be in the presence of and certainly not in relationship with, that which is unholy. But remember also that God is personal and desires to be in relationship with us. You can see the problem. We are imperfect, prone to sin, and yet we were created by and for a loving relationship with a holy and perfect God. That puts us at odds with God; the Bible actually says “enmity.” We have become God’s enemies.

That enmity, the reality of our willful sin and our flippant dismissal of God’s presence, places us under judgment. There are eternal laws operating in the universe. There are natural laws, like gravity and death, and there are eternal laws of God. There is an eternal gravity to sin and there is spiritual death in addition to physical death. God takes sin so seriously that the Bible says that the wages of sin is death. There is a penalty to breaking God’s heart; there are consequences for rejecting God and living the life He has given us in ways that corrupt what He has made. The consequence is God’s wrath.

God’s wrath is directed against sin. It is not arbitrary, it is directly aimed at our rebellion against God and the marring of the created order He has made. Sin has defaced God’s masterpiece and His anger is righteously directed against the culprits: you and me. Read Numbers 25:3, John 3:36, Ephesians 5:6. Initiate a search of the term “wrath” at www.BibleGateway.com. You will see that the wrath of God is a just response from God’s holy character and perfect justice. Consider how your own anger rises when you witness injustice. How much more does the wrath of a holy God rise against sin because His law and His love are violated?

When God’s wrath is poured out against sin, sinners experience the consequences. That includes you and me. Ephesians 2:3 says “All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.” All of us, our sinful nature; we were objects of wrath – that puts us personally in the path of God’s just wrath.

The wrath of God, which includes death, destruction and devastation, ultimately results in eternal condemnation. Yes, we’re talking about the reality of hell. The result of living a life unrecon-

ciled to God, the result of choosing not to repent, not to receive the grace offered by God is an eternity separated from Him. That’s hell and according to the Bible, it’s real. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves.

While people may make light of God and the idea of eternal judgment, the Bible says in Hebrews 10:31 that “it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of a living God.” Indeed, Galatians 6:7-8 says, “Do not be deceived, God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction.” I don’t know about you, but I want to reap joy and peace and life, not death and destruction.

Martin Luther said, “Human reason cannot comprehend the magnitude of God’s anger over sin.” We cannot fathom it because we do not have anything close to the character of God. My pastor calls it “moral smallness.” He said that “just as a child cannot comprehend the splendor of the universe because of his mental capacity, so we cannot grasp the depths of God’s anger because of our moral smallness.” Be assured, God’s vision and judgment are not the ones that are flawed.

If these things are true, if we know that we have committed some capital offense, we have two options: flee with the hope of hiding and evading justice, living as a fugitive on the run; or throwing ourselves on the mercy of the court, confessing our sin and accepting the penalty.

Questions for reflection and conversation

1. Do you believe in the just wrath of God against sin and therefore, sinners? If not, then how do you understand and receive the authority of the Bible in your life?
2. If you do not take sin as seriously as God takes sin, then who do you think Jesus is and what do you think He accomplished on the cross at Calvary?
3. Read the gospel of John. What did Jesus say about Himself, why did He say that He came into the world, who did He understand Himself to be, what did He tell the disciples was the reason for His death?
4. With those words of Jesus on your heart and in your mind, who do you say that He is? Is your answer different from His?
5. Who then is really the Lord of your thoughts and how is your life guided by the Scriptures if you do not receive Jesus’ own words about Himself as Truth?

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Week III: According to the Bible, why did Jesus ‘have’ to die on the cross?

Romans 3:23-25 says that “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

God presented Him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in His blood. He did this to demonstrate His justice.”

On the cross, Jesus took the punishment we deserved. That is Love. Not counting our sins against us, but counting them against Himself in the flesh of Jesus, God incarnate. That is God’s nature: satisfying His own wrath with His own self-sacrificial love.

Jesus, on the cross, is the means by which the perfect love of God and the holy wrath of God are fully expressed.

Jesus had to die on the cross because we could not endure the penalty of our own sin and live.

So, God endured the penalty of our sin and then raised Jesus from the penalty of death that we might have a restored path to a relationship with Himself.

Isaiah 53:5-6 says, “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

We 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.”

Jesus suffered and died on the cross in order that you might be forgiven of your sins, cleansed of the realities of death and destruction you have wrought, restored in relationship to the God who made you and loved you.

Jesus died on the cross to satisfy God’s wrath against your sin – and against you as a sinner.

The good news of the Gospel is what that means for you now: salvation is available.

The Bible makes clear that although Jesus died as an atoning sacrifice for your sin, people are not universally saved by Jesus’ act on the cross.

A response is necessary. We must turn from sin to Christ, trust Him, accepting God’s grace poured out.

Throwing ourselves on the mercy of the Judge who is ultimately just and relying on the character of God’s equally perfect love, “we confess our sins, and God, who is faithful and just, will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

This is what it means to repent and this is what it means to be converted; to turn from sin and death to righteousness and life.

Questions for reflection and conversation

1. Can you see how the apologetic approach that begins with getting a person to suspend their disbelief leads naturally, over time, to a conversation about the saving grace of God offered in Jesus Christ upon the cross?
2. Can you see that the need to bridge the culture chasm of their intellectual questions is necessary before you can introduce them to the work of the One who bridges the sin chasm?
3. If you are not familiar with “the Roman Road,” Google it or visit and explore how this lesson might be enhanced or supplemented by that material.
4. Reflect on and discuss your own experience of coming to a saving faith in Jesus Christ and consider who in your life yet needs to hear the good news of God’s grace in Him.

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Week IV: If God is perfect then His plans are perfect. If God is not perfect then God is not God

Considering again the resistance of those who have been raised in a culture of skepticism about supernatural reality and who have a legitimate cynicism toward the Church, your friend may well return to the presupposition you made at the outset.

Remember, you asked them to suspend their disbelief and you asked them to accept, for sake of conversation, the reality of the personal God revealed in the Bible. That's a great deal of disbelief to suspend! We should not be surprised if they want to return to those questions and probe more fully.

We were asked, "How could you believe in a God whose overarching plan for the world included, by necessity, making His own Son suffer and die?" The personal answer to that question matters.

To a post-modern person, the authenticity of relationship trumps all other evidence you can present. Authentic relationships and your personal story matter more than the best logical proofs. So, you need to love to tell the story.

If it were me, I would say, "I believe in God whose son, Jesus, died in my stead. I believe that because I know Him. I know Him as my Father, my Savior and my constant companion. I know Him as the God who is enthroned in Heaven and the Spirit enthroned right here in my heart. I know Him as the Lord of my thoughts and the governor of my actions. I know God to be utterly loving and utterly faithful. He has cared for me in times of great distress. He has never failed me and never forsaken me. He has forgiven me – once for all – but also every day when I confess anew the truth that I fail and fall and falter. I walk with Him and yes, I talk with Him. I know Him through Creation and I know Him through the revelation of the Bible and I know Him by the present power of His Holy Spirit working in my life every moment of every day. I know Him, not just as an idea or as a part of a religion. I know Him as my Lord and my God. Knowing God as I do, I trust Him and I love Him. God demonstrated His love for me when, while I was still a sinner, Jesus Christ died for me. He did it out of love – and yes, to satisfy His own perfectly just wrath."

In order to engage the reality of the post-modern culture, every Christian must actually know the One in whom we profess to believe. Knowing about God is not enough. Knowing what the Bible says is not enough. We must know God. Not that God needs defending, but people need an authentic introduction to the living God – and not some caricature of Him.

Attend to your own walk. Ask yourself, "Is there sufficient evidence that I've been with Jesus? Can people tell by my cadence, my attitude, my disposition, my words, my deeds, my tone ... that I've been with the Lord? Am I glowing? Do I bear the aroma of Christ? Is the fragrance of my life pleasing to God and winsome to man? We must do our own soul work before we can hope to attend to the needs of others.

Consider also the questions about God that persist for you. They are likely the questions of others. Rest assured, God is big enough to handle your questions and the Church needs you to ask. We are mutually strengthened in our life together as we authentically

ask the hard questions and seek together the wisdom and will of God. He is faithful.

If you do not have a grasp of the scope of God's Word as one comprehensive story, read through the Bible. Use the fast-paced but tried and true methods of *The Bible in 90 Days* (www.biblein-90days.org) or participate on-line in The Gospel Project (www.gospelproject.com). The old fashioned method of reading it from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21 may be enhanced by using a study like *The Journey: A Trip Through the Bible* by pastor Don Elliott (available by calling 800-368-0110).

In terms of personal equipping for conversations with the generation in which we live, great resources abound. Focus on the Family's *The Truth Project* and Lee Strobel's *The Case for a Creator* and *The Case for Christ* are must reads.

Questions for reflection and conversation:

1. What's your personal answer to the question of why and how you can believe in a God who sent His own Son to suffer and die?
2. How do you tell that story in a compelling way, supported by scripture and thoughtful answers to the resistance of this generation?
3. What do you need to do to be more fully equipped to be used of God to advance His Kingdom?