

## How Long Wilt Thou Conceal Thy Face

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

How long wilt thou conceal thy face?  
My God, how long delay?  
When shall I feel those heavenly rays  
That chase my fears away?

See how the Prince of darkness tries  
All his malicious arts;  
He spreads a mist around my eyes,  
And throws his fiery darts.

Be thou my sun, and thou my shield,  
My soul in safety keep;  
Make haste before mine eyes are seal'd  
In death's eternal sleep.

How would the tempter boast aloud,  
Should I become his prey!  
Behold the sons of hell grow proud  
To see thy long delay.

But they shall fly at thy rebuke,  
And Satan hide his head;  
He knows the terrors of thy look,  
And hears thy voice with dread.

Thou wilt display that sovereign grace,  
Whence all my comforts spring;  
I shall employ my lips in praise,  
And thy salvation sing.

## ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

### *In the Nick of Time*

#### Justice, Wrath, and Propitiation

Kevin T. Bauder

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The gospel reveals many aspects of God's character. It certainly reveals His love, mercy, grace, goodness, and kindness. If we want to know whether the true and living God is a God of love, all we have to do is to look at the cross. Yet the gospel reveals more than God's love: it also reveals God's justice (Rom. 1:17).

Many English translators use the word *righteousness* for the Greek term *dikaïosunēs*. Unfortunately, the contemporary word *righteous*, like the word *sin*, has lost much of its denotation and most of its connotation. The alternative term *justice*, however, strikes exactly the right note. Even people who claim to reject moral absolutes still retain a sense of justice. If you want to see their sense of justice at work, just step in front of them in the queue at the supermarket. Everybody believes in justice. Everybody wants justice, at least for themselves.

Paul says that the gospel (Rom. 1:16) reveals God's justice (Rom. 1:17). He then draws a direct line from this revelation of justice to the revelation of God's wrath (Rom. 1:18). He states that God's wrath is revealed against all the impiety and injustice of humans who suppress the truth in injustice. In other words, the rejection of God's standard of justice brings with it a moral opprobrium that demands retribution. As a just judge, God must visit retribution upon all injustice (so Paul says) without exception.

The condition of having committed injustice and consequently of meriting retribution is what Scripture calls *guilt*. In the Bible, guilt is not a feeling but a condition. Guilt is the moral opprobrium that attaches to injustice and demands retribution. When God visits retribution upon the guilty, He is exhibiting what Scripture calls *wrath*. In other words, divine wrath is not irritability or peevishness. God is not One to pitch a fit like a petulant teenager. God's wrath is simply His justice directed against guilt in retribution.

God's justice is at stake in every sinful deed, as we should recognize intuitively. We despise even human judges who knowingly clear the guilty, but at least when human judges become corrupt we can retain some hope that a



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final judgment is pending. If, however, the final judge, the judge of all flesh and the moral arbiter of the universe, were to clear the guilty—if He were to leave injustices unavenged—then Justice itself would fail. That would be a condition even worse than hell.

But God does not overlook sin. Instead, He reveals His wrath (His determination to visit retribution) upon *all* human injustice. He reveals His wrath against the injustices of the pagans (Rom. 1:19-32), the injustices of the seemingly (at least to themselves) moral (Rom. 2:1-16), and the injustices of the religious—even when their religion is of God’s own revelation (Rom. 2:17-3:8).

There is no justice without retribution. Retribution means that God will repay each of us according to our individual deeds (Rom. 2:6). More specifically, retribution means that to those who obey injustice, God will repay wrath, anger, affliction, and distress (Rom. 2:8-9). This is exactly what God owes to all humans, for absolutely all humans are “under sin,” which means that all humans bear guilt and merit retribution (Rom. 3:9). Without exception, no one is just (Rom. 3:10).

The fundamental barrier between God and humans is guilt. No matter how much God might love people (and let us grant that He does), He cannot overlook their guilt. He must visit retribution upon them. He must recompense their injustice with wrath.

This is the point at which the cross really matters. To be sure, the cross is an example. It is a moral influence. It is a paid-up ransom. It is the occasion of Jesus’ victory over principalities and powers. It is an illustration of the gravity with which God views infractions of His moral government. It is all these things, but if it were only these things, it could not save us. None of these effects of the cross manages to address the fundamental problem, and that problem is our guilt. Somehow at Calvary God had to remove our guilt, or we would be forever condemned.

Salvation confronts us with a massive paradox. On the one hand, we all sinned and have fallen short of God’s glorious standard, i.e., His justice (Rom. 3:23). On the other hand, God pronounces at least some sinners to be just (i.e., He justifies them), and He does this completely without cost to them (Rom. 3:24). Does not such a declaration of justice constitute a moral contradiction? Does it not implicate God in the unspeakable injustice of clearing the guilty (Ex. 34:7)?

It would, except for the cross. By His cross-work and through His blood, Jesus presented Himself as a propitiatory sacrifice, i.e., a sacrifice that made satisfaction (Rom. 3:25). What did His death satisfy? The entire context gives the answer to this question. By dying on the cross, the Lord Jesus Christ satisfied justice, which is to say that He satisfied God’s wrath. The only way to satisfy justice is through retribution. Guilt must be visited with anger,

wrath, affliction, and distress. This retribution was visited upon Jesus Christ, not because He Himself was in any way displeasing to God, but because we were. Our guilt was charged against Him, and He bore God’s wrath as He occupied our place.

God never overlooks guilt. If He could overlook guilt, He would no longer be God because He would no longer be just. True forgiveness does not merely ignore or wink at transgressions. God can forgive sin because He has actually already judged the guilt of every sin at the cross of Christ. Our guilt has received its just retribution in the person of Christ, who has suffered for us the equivalent penalty of wrath, anger, affliction, and distress. God caused our iniquity to fall upon Him (Isa. 53:6).

That is why it is not wrong for God to say that we are just, provided only that we have trusted in the provision of Jesus and that it has accordingly been applied to us. God can pronounce us just because that is how He now sees us. God can remove (expiate) our sins because justice has been satisfied (propitiated). In the cross, God shows Himself to be *both* just *and* the justifier of each one who believes on Jesus (Rom. 3:26).

The glory of the cross is that it gives full play to God’s justice (Rom. 3:26) while also giving full play to His mercy and grace. That means that the gospel is not only a revelation of God’s love, but also a revelation of God’s justice. If we want to see the love of God clearly demonstrated, all we have to do is to look at the cross. But that is not all. If we want to see the wrath of God fully demonstrated, we must also look at the cross. The gospel shines the dazzling light of God’s glory upon both.



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This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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