

Did Jesus experience the wrath of God on the cross?

This is a controversial subject in some Christian circles. Some Christians understand Scripture to teach that Jesus did experience the wrath of God on the cross (“penal substitution”). Others believe this to be profoundly mistaken, even offensive. They believe Jesus was, through his death, reconciling us to God. But they do not believe he suffered the wrath of God, in order to gain our forgiveness. They see that as dividing the Father and the Son.

I need to say that I do believe Jesus was experiencing the wrath of God on the cross, and I explain why I believe that below. But I want to say, to begin with, that I do not believe God the Father was angry with God the Son. He was angry with the sin of humanity which Jesus was bearing. The Persons of the Trinity, in their love, cooperated in bringing about this reconciliation. They were not (nor could they be) divided. The attitude of the Father and Spirit throughout was one of love for Jesus, especially as he made such a sacrifice to save humanity. He was the One who took human nature into his divine nature in order to achieve this atonement.

The reasons I believe Jesus did experience the wrath of God on the cross

1. Jesus “became a curse” for us on the cross, experiencing the delayed divine punishment on human sin

Paul writes “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.’ (Gal 3:21). He also writes “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished” (Rom 3:25). So, the cross was about the curse on sin and punishment for sin. Jesus bore that curse and punishment for us.

2. Jesus’ cry of dereliction shows he was experiencing the wrath of God against human sin

Jesus cried out on the cross “My, God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46; Psa 22:1). Jesus was experiencing God-forsakenness which is, of course, the punishment on sin. It is actually experiencing Hell. What other reason could Jesus have for saying these words other than that Some Christians try to say Jesus was briefly implying the wording of the whole psalm, including verse 24 “For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.” But this is special pleading. Jesus only quoted verse 1. On the face of it, verse 24 contradicts what Jesus actually said. But what it means is that God accepted the sacrificial pain of Jesus).

3. God the Father did not answer Jesus’ prayer for deliverance from the Hell of the cross

Jesus “fell with his face to the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will’” (Matt 26:39). Clearly, he was horrified at the prospect of experiencing the wrath of God against human sin. He prayed this three times, but his prayer was not answered. In view of the fact that Jesus was totally committed to dying for humanity, the fact that he prayed for the cup of suffering to be taken from him, shows that he was not just anticipating the horror of crucifixion, but something far worse – the wrath of God against human sin. This is backed up by the previous two verses “He began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death’ vv 37-38). To be overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death is an anticipation of something even worse than crucifixion. Jesus was anticipating experiencing the wrath of God against human sin.

4. Jesus “himself bore our sins in his body on the cross” (1 Peter 2:24)

It is clear from this statement that Jesus died as our sinbearer, and, as such, would necessarily suffer the wrath of God against that sin. This is backed up by the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament, which, of course, were prophetic pictures of the Cross. Part of the preparation for these sacrifices was the laying on of hands upon the animal, which is referred to frequently in Leviticus. This clearly speaks of transferring human sin to the sacrificial animal. It is explicit with the scapegoat. The high priest “is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites – all their sins – and put them on the goat’s head. He shall send the goat away into the wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness” (Lev 16:21-22).

So, Jesus was bearing our sins on the cross. But what does that mean? Some see it as his suffering the penalty for human sin. Others see him as bearing our sins in his own body, which is surely the meaning of 1 Peter 2:24. The bodies of the sin offerings were burnt outside the camp (Heb 13:11) because they were unclean spiritually. The writer to the Hebrews says “Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.” This was “the disgrace he bore” (Heb 13:12-13). This surely means that he was spiritually unclean because he was bearing the sin of humanity.

Isaiah prophesies that people would mistakenly think Jesus was suffering for his own sins: “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.” He continues: “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.” Jesus was “crushed” (which clearly means punished) for our iniquities. He adds “the punishment that brought us peace was on him” which shows Jesus suffered our punishment. Then Isaiah says “Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer” (Isaiah 53:4-5, 10). Isaiah is clearly saying that Jesus suffered divine punishment for our sins.

I repeat what I said at the beginning, I do not believe God was angry with Jesus on the cross. But I do believe that he was displaying divine wrath against the sin of humanity which Jesus was bearing on the cross.

Did Jesus experience the wrath of God on the cross? Yes, He did, but only because he was bearing our sin in his body. He himself was innocent and the wrath of God was against the sin of humanity, not against Jesus.

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