

Angry Birds and Vessels of Wrath

Romans 9:18-22

Romans (no. 25 in the series)

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Peter Hiett

Video and audio versions available online:

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Transcript document prepared by: Brett Eades (brett@thesanctuarydowntown.org)

This document was prepared by Brett Eades using Peter's notes and the video version of this sermon. If you encounter any significant discrepancies or errors in this document, please let Brett know. Thank you!

Prayer

If you're new or watching online, it's important to know that this is our 26th message from Romans and all of the other messages have prepared us for this one today, I didn't just pick this out of the air. Let's pray, Father, thank you so very much that you are our Father. And thank you so very much for your Word, who is our Lord Jesus. And thank you for your Spirit that inhabits your temple, your body, and your bride—which is us. And Lord God, we pray now that you would help us to speak and to hear and to be what you want us to be, Lord God. In Jesus' name, we pray this, amen.

Romans 9:18-24:

So then [God] has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. [God has Free Will] ¹⁹ You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” ²⁰ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded [plasma, from *plasso*] say to its molder [*plasanti*, from *plasso*], “Why have you made me like this?” ²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump [*phyrama*] one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? ²² What if God, desiring to show his wrath [*orge*] and to make known his power, has endured [*phero*: borne] with much patience vessels of wrath [*orge*] prepared for destruction, ²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand [*proetoimazo*] for glory— ²⁴ even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

About seventeen years ago I went skiing with my friend Philip Yancey. Billy Graham once said that Philip was his favorite contemporary Christian author and at the time, I was Philip's Pastor. For decades I had been most troubled by two texts: Isaiah 66 and Romans 9. This idea that God, our Father, would create beings, just like me, to be vessels of wrath, or even allow them to become vessels of wrath, upon whom he would pour out his unending wrath was a bit problematic for my heart. Philip had recently written a wonderful book titled What's So Amazing About Grace and so, I started running some of my theories by Philip.

Near the Morrison exit, I said, “Hey Philip, do you think it’s possible, that vessels of wrath don’t have a soul... and so aren’t actually persons like you or like me... and so God annihilates them for they don’t actually exist... and so everything, that’s anything, he does make new... just like he says in Revelation 21?” And I remember Philip stopped me, turned, and said, “Peter are you trying to get me in trouble?” He wasn’t joking and so I changed the topic.

From hundreds, maybe thousands, of angry emails and letters, he had learned that Grace can be amazing, but not too amazing. At the time, I was simply hoping that God saved everyone that’s anyone and trying to deal with all the passages that clearly said that he did. For whatever reason, I used to know a lot of famous evangelical leaders and discovered that almost all of them hoped what I hoped, thought it was even biblical, but went to great pains to avoid saying such things in public. It seems we need people to blame; people on whom we can vent our anger and vessels of wrath fit the bill. And just the thought is helpful for getting our way so, even if we pastors don’t talk about it, we want everyone to assume it: if you don’t sign up for camp and give to the building program, you might just be a “vessel of wrath.”

Ever since Tertullian, the first Roman theologian, many like Augustine, Aquinas, Jonathan Edwards and even Isaac Watts have taught that the suffering of those vessels of wrath will actually increase the joy of the vessels of Mercy.ⁱ If you’re of the Calvinist bent, it will supposedly make you grateful for God’s kindness to you. And if you’re of the Arminian bent, it will supposedly amplify the dignity of your free choice, for there’s so much dignity in endless gloating over other people’s sufferings, I guess.

I once tried to have the conversation with my Dad, and he was so horrified at the mention of the term, “Vessels of Wrath,” or even the thought of people without souls, that he just wouldn’t talk with me about it—vessels of wrath. It’s like a dirty family secret, that haunts everything we do as Christians. Some find it enticing as an outlet for their unforgiveness and anger. Some find it useful for issuing threats and getting their way. Although it makes people obedient with their words and sometimes actions, it sure does make us doubt the Love of God in our hearts, doesn’t it? I think it makes us all, kind of, secretly, angry.

So, what is a vessel of wrath or just a vessel? You know Adam is a vessel, he’s an earthen vessel. On the 6th day of creation God took a lump of clay and made Adam. And then out of the same lump [*phyrana*] he made Eve. Paul’s going to use that word again in two chapters when he writes—if the dough offered as the first fruits is Holy, so is the whole lump [*phyrana*]. And you see that’s interesting, because we’re all made from the same lump. And according to Paul, Jesus is the Eschatos Adam, which makes all of us the Eschatos Eve, his *Echatos* Bride—who is actually his body—all the same lump.

Well, vessels contain stuff, or not, which kind of makes you angry, huh? You get the wine bottle down and there’s nothing in it pisses me off! A vessel’s real worth isn’t defined by what it is, but by the empty space meant to contain what it is not.ⁱⁱ A vessel can be sealed, and a vessel can be opened, and a vessel can be opened at both ends so that what it contains is always moving like blood in a blood vessel. Eight years ago, one of the vessels in my heart got full of itself, and so stopped bleeding, and so I almost died. My whole body was angry with that one blood vessel, but then profoundly grateful for that one vessel once the doctor reamed it out and it started bleeding

once again. Well, we're all vessels, so what's a vessel of wrath—*orge*, in the Greek? *Orge* is in one word group with words like organ and orgasm. It obviously means "anger" in places but it's more than just anger; it's the expression of a deep passion. And God has *orge*, wrath, or at least he had wrath. The wrath of God is some pretty wild stuff.

So far in Romans we've learned:

- Romans 1:18: "...the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth (and remember Jesus is the Truth) ... the truth imprisoned in the chains of their own unrighteousness." It pisses God off when you do that.
- Romans 2:5: with our "hard and impenitent heart" we're storing up wrath for the "day of wrath when God's righteous judgment is revealed."
- Romans 2:8: So "for those who are self-seeking and don't obey the Truth [imprisoned within them, I would suppose], but obey unrighteousness... there will be wrath and fury."
- But in 3:5: we learned that our unrighteousness actually reveals the righteousness judgment of God, which is like the most important thing in all of space and time, in all of creation, according to Paul
- In 4:15: we learned that the law (which is the knowledge of Good and evil taken from a tree in order to justify ourselves) ... "the law brings wrath." And yet God planted that tree, didn't he?
- In 5:9: we learned that when Jesus gave his life on the tree, it was like open heart surgery or a blood transfusion which saves us from "the wrath." ... just "the wrath (period)." [Translators often add the phrase, "of God," but it's not actually in the text...See? It's not only God that gets angry... don't you get angry too...sometimes at God?]

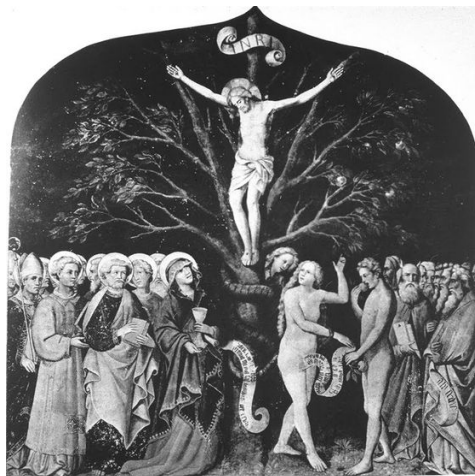
Here in Romans 9 Paul mentions these "vessels of wrath." But in 12:19 Paul is going to tell us to never avenge ourselves but to give place for the wrath of God. Then he tells us to be kind to our enemies for it is literally "heaping burning coals upon their heads;" it's "overcoming evil with Good." You see, wrath is a crazy thing in the book of Romans and in the rest of the Bible. In places like Genesis 15 and Deuteronomy 31, it's clear that God plans for sin by hardening hearts, and even plans his wrath as a response to that sin.ⁱⁱⁱ Just now in our text Paul wrote, "What if God desiring to show his wrath?" God plans his wrath, as if there is an eternal purpose for wrath. And yet both the Old Testament and New Testament are very clear that the wrath of God comes to an end. That's why endless wrath is profoundly unbiblical, as well as just plain stupid. It would mean that God would be endlessly dissatisfied with his own failure to make people in his image and fill all creation with love. God would be endlessly unsaved from his own anger.^{iv}

In the Revelation wrath comes to an end, and it's revealed that Jesus is that End, which is why he lifted his head on the tree and cried "it is finished." And check this out: In the revelation there are bowls of wrath—that's vessels of wrath—and in the bowls is blood, blood which burns like fire, but is also wine, the very best of wine. It flows like a river from a slaughtered lamb standing on a throne—a throne which is a wine press—a wine press that crushes grapes of wrath, which are vessels of wrath, transforming the blood of those grapes into the wine of God's Mercy. So, wrath is like the fluid that Love bleeds enthroned on a tree in a garden. And check this out, all you

earthen vessels, every weekend you come here to drink blood that is wine, in other words, wrath that is mercy.

So Anyway: Paul writes “What if”—he’s not even saying this is the case, but—“What if God desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.” Which raises an even more fascinating question: Who prepares these vessels? Paul tells us that God, himself, prepares the vessels of mercy beforehand—at least before the vessels of wrath “are prepared” for destruction. God prepares vessels of Mercy beforehand, as if they are eternal. But vessels of wrath are prepared for destruction [in time].

According to Scripture, all that God does, endures forever. Ecclesiastes 3:14 “whatever God does, [Are you something God does?] endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it... That which is, has already been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.” Or maybe that which is imprisoned, like Truth—Eternal Truth imprisoned in us? Well, my point is that maybe God does not create these vessels, so much as allow them to think that they have created themselves. Which means that, ultimately, they are a delusion—the product of a lie. And weirder still, it’s not even clear, whether or not, it’s God’s wrath that’s in these vessels, on these vessels or is these vessels, for God has “endured these vessels.” So, when did God almighty ever endure vessels of wrath? Well, how about all the time?



"The Fall and Redemption of Man" by Giovanni da Modena

Don't you ever get angry? And in the end, don't we know there's only one to blame? Just as we preached last time—He's the free will of God almighty. So, when did God almighty endure vessels of wrath, angry vessels? All the time and in particular, on the tree in the garden on Mt Zion—the cross.



Gibson, Mel (Director). (2004). *The Passion of the Christ* [Motion picture]. USA: Icon Productions.

So, what is a vessel of Wrath?

[Facebook video of a bird repeatedly flying into a sliding door.]
[<https://www.facebook.com/750443163/videos/772217780616969>]

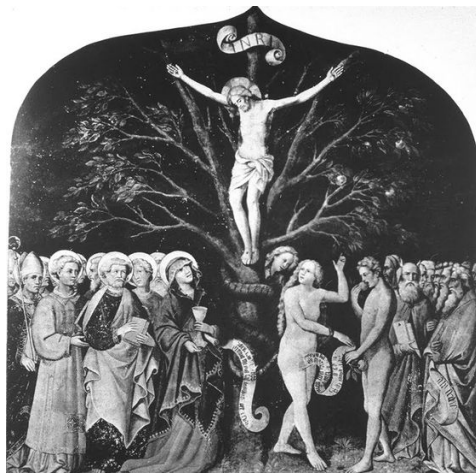
You may have seen this video posted on my Facebook page this last week. For months this Spring, as I prepared messages from Romans and wondered about the nature of the old man and the new man, the “false self” and the “true self,” the tupos and the super man, I had to endure this angry bird. And it kind of made me angry with its anger. At first, we couldn’t figure out what the incessant banging was, for we’d find nothing when we walked into the kitchen to investigate. But one morning Susan saw this bird hit the window and fly away. Then she noticed blood and bird goo smeared all over the window. We realized that if we stood still and about ten feet from the kitchen window, this bird (a robin) would just keep flying into the window, over and over, every morning, sometimes for hours on end. We stacked things in front of the window and taped scary things to the inside of the window. But this bird would perch on our stacks of baskets and chairs, look into the window, and keep flying into the window. Was it insane? Was it possessed? Who or what made that bird so angry?

Finally, my daughter Elizabeth did some Google searching and discovered that in spring, when male Robins are jacked up on testosterone—and I get that—they’ll sometimes see their reflection in a window and think that this reflection—which they produce just by looking in the window—is a competitor. They don’t realize that this “enemy” isn’t a real threat, but actually an image of themselves created by themselves and then judged to be a threat by themselves while jacked up on testosterone and ego. The male Robin wants to be king of all he would survey and so, he will attack other birds to make them go away. But no matter how often he flies into the window, he can’t make his own reflection go away—every time he looks, there it is looking back.

Our Robin tried for about two months. According to Elizabeth’s research, they either kill themselves or give up when testosterone levels drop in late spring. But all they really need to defeat this enemy is “repentance.” That means, “get a new mind”—surrender their bird brain and submit to reality.^v They need to be saved, not from other birds, but from their own judgment.

I think this is why Paul wrote what he did in Romans 6:11: “You must consider yourself [reason yourself, logic yourself, logos yourself] to be dead to the sin and living to God in Christ Jesus.” And what is “the sin?” Well, It’s the original sin, which we all have committed at a tree in the garden of our own hearts. We take “knowledge of Good and evil and then construct an image of what we think we should be, but realize that we are not, and then try even harder to become. That “self”—that false self—stands before each of us as an idol we serve, and an accuser we can never appease; it tells us who we should be but are not. It is our evil task master, enslaver, and deepest prison. I try to be him, and I can’t make myself him, and so constantly beat myself up and beat him up, for he’s my own projection of me. So, every time I look in the mirror and judge myself, I find myself to be just a little more bloodied and covered in a little more goo than last time. I’m always trying to create myself, redeem myself and so justify myself, but only end up condemning myself and that self is not actually who I Am. I blame myself, and then blame God for myself, but that self is not actually myself, only the projection of myself created by me and my judgements, rather than by God and his judgment. It’s the vessel of my own wrath in which I am imprisoned.^{vi}

The book of James refers to the law as a mirror—we look and see what we should be but can’t seem to make ourselves become. But it also refers to the “perfect law, completed law, finished law of freedom” —we look into that mirror and become who we actually are. We do “good works which God prepared beforehand that we would walk in them.” That’s Paul in Ephesians 2:10^{vii} In 1 Corinthians, Paul also talks about mirrors: “and that we look into a mirror dimly. But one day we will look face to face, and then we will know fully, even as we have been fully known.”^{viii} Lovers look into each other’s eyes and see themselves reflected there. Remember there are two ways of knowing in Scripture: one that brings death and one that results in babies.



"The Fall and Redemption of Man" by Giovanni da Modena

The law is the knowledge of Good and evil taken from the tree in an effort to make oneself in the image of God and it’s dead knowledge. Love is knowledge given on the tree, by the One who is Life and our Helper—Our Helper made fit for each and every one of us, his bride. So, when I stand at the foot of the cross, I discover who I am not—I am not a good person, who created himself with his own knowledge of good and evil. I discover who I am not and who I am—I am the beloved created with body broken and blood shed, and “it is finished,” and I am good.

So, you see, I'll never conquer the sin—or any sin, shame, anxiety, or fear—I'll never conquer the enemy by condemning my old man and trying to fix my old man with my old man. I can only conquer my old man through the revelation that he's been conquered, that he's dead, and in truth never actually existed. And that's called "repentance:" I lose my psyche and find it; I surrender my bird brain and receive the mind of Christ; I know as I am fully known. And that's 100% Mercy; if I think I deserve that Mercy, I still don't know Mercy. "It's his kindness that leads us to repentance;" it's Mercy that wakes us up to Mercy.

Well, the bird was angry, and I was angry at the anger of that bird. And I didn't have the ability to bring an end to all that anger. To do that, I'd have enter the psyche of that bird and give that bird a new thought, a new idea, a new logos, a new word implanted in that bird brain like a seed. Well, we each create a false self—who really pisses us off. And I bet we also create false neighbors—who we blame for pissing us off. We know what they should be, but can't seem to be, and that pisses us off. And I bet we create a false God—that is, what we think God should be, but refuses to be, which makes us nail him to a tree. We're all angry at God, for we think our judgment is better than God's judgment because somewhere along the line we got ourselves a little knowledge of Good and evil.

Remember how Adam and Eve took knowledge of good, and realized they weren't good, and so covered themselves—they blamed themselves. And remember how Adam blamed Eve? And then remember how Adam blamed God for making Eve? He followed the blame train like we all follow the blame train, like we spoke on last time. In the end there's only one to blame, the Free Will of God.



Gibson, Mel (Director). (2004). *The Passion of the Christ* [Motion picture]. USA: Icon Productions.

We all follow the blame train until we end up back in the garden and realize that there's only one to blame, but he has no faults, and he isn't blaming us. Which means everything is going according to plan, which means all of our anger was about nothing, nothing but the revelation of Mercy. Mercy, which isn't nothing but actually the only something—everything that's anything is Mercy; it's Grace—even and especially us. We come back to the tree, and all our anger turns into something else, entirely.

Romans 9:20-24:

Who are you, O man, to answer back to God? [Maybe we are his kids, predestined to be free as he is free?] **Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?”** ²¹ **Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?**

²² **What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, ²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand [*proetoi-mazo*^{ix}] for glory— ²⁴ even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?**

Paul is quoting the verses from Isaiah that we mentioned last time.^x And he’s also alluding to some fascinating stories about Jeremiah and a potter, in the potter’s field, where Judas hung himself, in the valley of Gehenna just outside the walls of Jerusalem.

In Jeremiah 18 God tells Jeremiah to watch this potter make a pot, a vessel, from a lump of clay, and when the pot is spoiled on the wheel, the potter reworks it into another vessel, and the Lord says, “Oh house of Israel, can I not do with you as the Potter has done?”

In Jeremiah 19 God tells Jeremiah to buy one of the Potter’s earthen vessels and then break it in the Potter’s field and say to everyone watching, “Thus says the Lord of hosts: So, will I break this people and this city so it cannot be mended.” Those people were the Jews of Judah, which also became a name, and that name is Judas. And that city was Jerusalem which people have built time and time again, which gets destroyed time and time again, but then comes down new, and forever new, from God.

Jeremiah 31 “I was their husband, declares the Lord.” But then “after those days, declares the Lord, I will put my law within them ...they shall all know me... For I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more. The city shall be rebuilt... and the measuring line shall go out further... the whole valley of the dead bodies and the ashes (that’s “Gehenna” sometimes translated “Hell”) the whole valley... shall be sacred to the Lord.” (“Hell” will be inside the New Jerusalem, swallowed up by the Kingdom of Heaven.)

And check this out: When the city comes down it will be constructed with living stones and filled with glory, and one of the foundation stones, will apparently be “Judas,” not because he chose, but because God chose Judas, and Judah, and the Jews. Apparently, God can do things that we cannot do and one day we’ll know it, because we’ll be known by him, our Creator

So maybe a vessel of wrath is a vessel upon which God exercises wrath, destroying it and then making it new. Broken pottery will eventually turn back into clay and can be made new. Or maybe a vessel of wrath is a vessel upon which God exercises wrath, by making it new. That’s what the potter did with the lump of clay on his wheel, and according to Scripture you’re on his wheel being created right now.

Maybe a vessel of wrath is a vessel that's empty. Maybe it's empty of "Love Joy Peace Patience Kindness the Good, Faith, Gentleness, and Temperance." Maybe it's empty of Faith, Hope and Love. And so, it's full of itself, full of pride, which is a ridiculous illusion; it's a dream that turns into a nightmare. Maybe it's empty of Mercy, which means it's full of anger. Maybe it's empty of Reason, which makes it a stupid angry bird. Maybe God destroys that vessel of Wrath, by emptying it of wrath and filling it with Mercy and God is Mercy—*hesed*, in Hebrew; that's Relentless Love.

Calvinists will argue that some people need to be vessels of wrath, so that other people—that is, themselves—will be grateful for Mercy for themselves. "Arminiuns (Joseph Arminius)" will argue that some people need to be vessels of wrath, so that other people—that is themselves—will display the glory of human dignity for they have freely chosen Mercy and so, saved themselves. But Paul is saying that each of us, by nature, are vessels of wrath^{xi}, predestined to become vessels of Mercy, such that one day we would each know Mercy for we've each been known by Mercy, and so freely choose Mercy, for he is our Helper, our Husband, and the deepest longing in the depths of our collective soul (and our individual souls).

Romans 9:25-26:

As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people [Sounds like vessels of wrath... huh?] I will call 'my people,' [Sounds like vessels of mercy... huh?] And her who was not beloved (or no Mercy) [that has to be a vessel of wrath] I will call 'beloved.'" [that's definitely a vessel of mercy] ²⁶ "And in the very place [*topos*] where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there (in that place) they will be called 'sons of the living God.'"

Hopefully you remember that the prophet Hosea (which means "Salvation") was commanded to marry Gomer the harlot, so Hosea would know what it was like for God to be married to Israel. Then he's commanded to name one of his children "No Mercy" for quote "I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel, to forgive them at all."^{xii} Then he's commanded to name one of his children "Not My People," which is equivalent to calling all of Judah a bunch of illegitimate bastards... "for you are not my people, and I am not your God."^{xiii} But then God says he will take his whoring bride into the wilderness and romance her there, by making "a door of hope."^{xiv} And he will betroth her to himself in faithfulness and Israel will "know the Lord."^{xv} Then in Hosea 2:23 he says, "And I will have mercy on No Mercy, and I will say to Not my People, you are my people; and he (Israel) shall say you are my God. "And in the very place—that moment in space and time where they experience wrath and rejection, in the very place where it was said to them, "you are not my people" (You see those moments and places have a purpose) "And in the very place where it was said to them 'you are not my people,' you will be called 'sons of the living God.'"^{xvi} (Notice that the order isn't reversed, as if it's critical to experience rejection at moments in time, to know what it is to be elect for all eternity. "And in the very place (*topos*—which sounds like *tupos*.)" In Romans chapter 5 we learned that the first Adam, old Adam, was a *tupos*, an imprint, of the Eschatos Adam in a lump of clay.^{xvii}



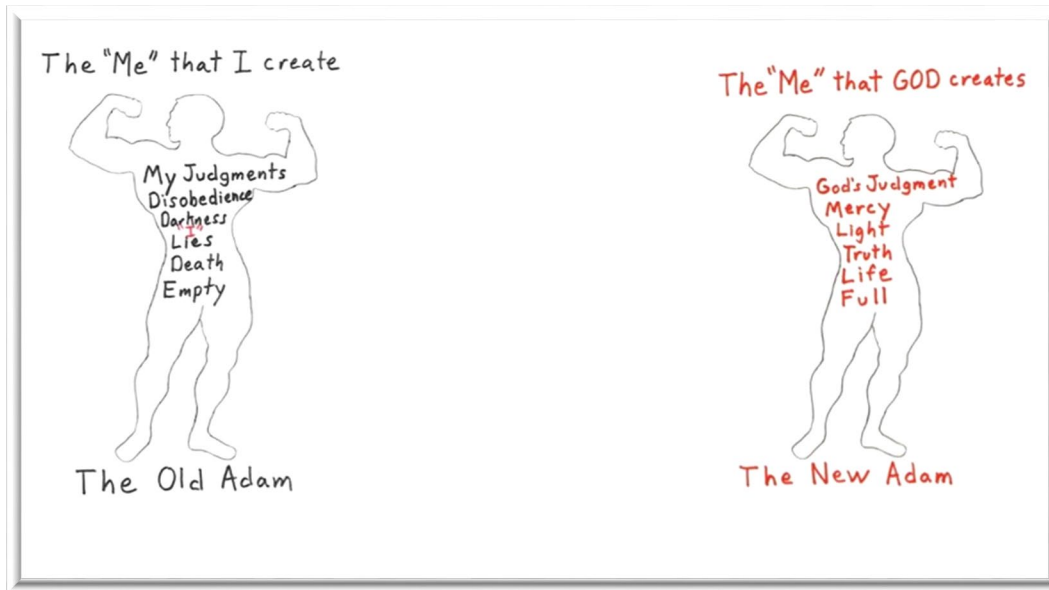
And hopefully you all remember how that imprint in the clay, was like knowledge of the Good, displayed as an absence of the Good.

- Or knowledge of life, experienced as death.
- Or knowledge of what I should be but cannot make myself.
- Or knowledge of Jesus in the form of the absence of Jesus...

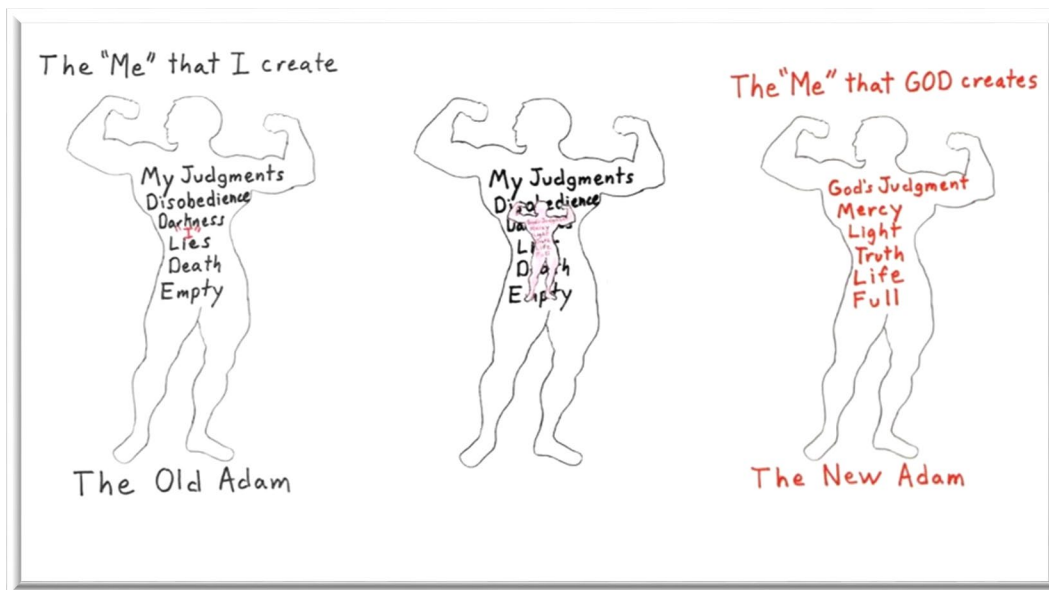
The tupos is a vessel of wrath. And that would mean that every vessel of wrath is a pattern created by the ultimate and eternal vessel of mercy, Jesus Christ our Lord. And yet every vessel of wrath is still prepared by us in space and time.

Hopefully you remember how the tupos grew in Romans 5: The law came in to increase the trespass,^{xviii} which increases the tupos, the body of sin and death.^{xix} For every time we sin, we take the life of Jesus, and so crucify Jesus and experience the absence of Jesus, and a greater need for Jesus. So that where sin increased (that would be a vessel of wrath), in that very place, Grace would abound all the more—that's Mercy.^{xx} So you see, there is no vessel of wrath without an eternal and corresponding vessel of Mercy.

In Romans 6, Paul referred to the tupos, who is Adam, as the Old Adam and we learned that there is New Adam that is born of the Old Adam.



And that Adam is somehow, also, the Eschatos Adam, that is the eternal Adam implanted in the Old Man, the Old Adam, like a baby in a womb.



A baby begotten from above, growing in space and time, and fixing to be born out of space and time into the age to come, eternity. I know it sounds crazy, but I didn't write the Bible.^{xxi} So deal with it.

Romans 9:27-29:

And Isaiah ["Yahweh is Salvation"] cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved,²⁸ for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay."²⁹ And as Isaiah predicted, "If the Lord of hosts had not left us

offspring [literally “sperm,” or more literally “a sperm,” according to Paul in Galatians—the promised, and indestructible, sperm, Jesus^{xxii}]**“If the Lord of hosts had not left us seed, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.”**

Hopefully you remember that Isaiah sees the Lord High and lifted up.^{xxiii} And the Lord tells Isaiah to preach a burning word. A Word that will burn Israel down to a remnant. And then burn them further down to a stump. And then he says that stump is the Holy Seed, the Sacred Sperm. Through that seed God redeems not only Israel, but all creation.

At the end of Isaiah, Isaiah 66, “all flesh”—which is all humanity—all flesh gazes down, from the edge of the New Jerusalem, on all the corpses of all that have rebelled against God, which according to Isaiah is all humanity and the Slaughtered Lamb who has “numbered [himself] with the transgressors.”^{xxiv} Those corpses, those bodies of sin and death, those vessels of wrath, are being destroyed by eternal fire in the Potter’s Field in the valley of Gehenna. While these people, these vessels of mercy that were once imprisoned in those very vessels of wrath, worship God with inexpressible joy for having saved them from themselves. “In Time, we are vessels of wrath:” writes Karl Barth, “In eternity we are not merely something more, but something utterly different; we are-vessels of mercy.”^{xxv}

And now I need to tell you a story that you’ll find hard to believe. But for me, it’s an experience that I cannot unbelieve. I’ve told you before, but can’t preach these verses, without telling you again. And then I’ll need to probably refer to it again before we finish the book of Romans. Soon after I had been defrocked for merely hoping that God might have mercy on all and soon after the Sanctuary had started, Susan and I prayed for a friend for whom we had spent countless hours praying over during the previous thirteen or fourteen years. She had been raised in the occult and ritually wed to the evil one, but God had done some absolutely miraculous and wonderful things to show her that she was actually his bride and not the mother of death, but the mother of the living (“Eve”).

She had just returned from a mission trip to Africa to minister to orphans. But one night on that trip, she had found herself by a campfire where some men sacrificed a goat. The evil one used it to remind her of horrors in the past, fill her with fear, believe some old lies, and so surrender to his designs. As we had done countless times before, we prayed through the memory, dealing with all sorts of demonic garbage and looking for Jesus. Susan will often see what the person we’re praying for is seeing but I have to go on what they tell me. My friend couldn’t see Jesus, and because of events in her past she was utterly terrified to look at the fire—that very place (*topos*) in particular; it was where she had been told by evil people that she was not beloved of God and that for her he had no mercy, and so she felt frail like a leaf driven by the wind.

Finally, I suggested she look in the direction of the fire. She said, “I don’t see him...” then “wait” she muttered, “he’s standing in the fire!” He motioned to our friend revealing something she was hanging on to that he wanted her to surrender to him and so she handed it to him standing in the fire. And then she said, “But I’m still really angry.” She was angry at herself—that she had been so fragile and easily deceived. She may have been angry at me—I often don’t know how to help.

And she was definitely angry at God—She knew him now; she had witnessed his power and there was now no denying: he had let this all happen. She was angry at God’s judgment and that was her judgment. “I’m really angry” she said. And then I just blurted out, “Well I’m angry too!” If there was a year of my life, when I had felt most faithful to God, and done what was asked, regardless of the consequences, it had been that year—the year that my church blew up, I was defrocked, and my kids were turned into pariahs. I had had thousands of attenders, book contracts, and agents; I thought we were set for a reformation and then it all miraculously blew up. There were plenty of folks to blame including myself and the devil, but in the end, I knew who it was that was in charge. It was Jesus. I was really angry at the Judgment of God and Jesus is the Judgment of God.

Then Susan said, “Well I’m angry too!” So, I asked them, “What’s Jesus doing, now?” They said, “He’s still standing in the fire with his hands outstretched, as if he wanted us to join him.” I said, “Ok... let’s do it, let’s walk into the fire.” So, we stood up, held hands, and said something like “Baptize us with your fire.” In the words of Paul in Romans 12:1, we did the *logikos* thing, logical worship—we presented our bodies a living sacrifice; we stepped into the fire. The three of us, with that fourth man, all of us of one lump, in the one Fire. After a time, I said to my friend, “What do you see?” And she said, “You’re ugly.” And I said, “I know but I mean in the vision.” She and Susan both said, “Yeah. In the vision you’re all burned up, charred, and really, really, ugly. We all are!” I didn’t know what to say at that point. The silence was longer than wanted it to be.

Then Susan said, “Peter, ask Jesus to blow on us.” I did, and He did, and then I heard my friend gasp in absolute wonder. She just blurted out “I’m not fragile. I’m not fragile. I’m not fragile.” Then she and Susan described what they saw: when Jesus blew on us—he blew the ashes from our skin revealing these bright, white indestructible, and eternal beings within. We were eternal vessels of Mercy, hidden in, and born from, vessels of wrath—vessels of wrath which we had prepared for destruction in time, and yet they had been the very imprint of eternity. Where sin had increased, Grace had abounded all the more. And so, we had come to know about evil, but in that very place God revealed the Good, and he is the Good, and so we freely chose to worship him... and that’s Good, and that’s Life—eternal life.

It’s genuinely diabolical that the church has believed the snake, and so with all our talk of the fires of hell, we’ve actually taught people to run from the judgment of God—when the judgment of God is salvation. Before you know it, you will see Jesus—And I imagine that he’ll be filled with fire and shining brighter than the sun. And you’ll be tempted to run and hide in the outer darkness, for you have been a vessel of wrath, and you will see that all your wrath is directed at him. But look again and you will see that his wrath is directed against your wrath with which you keep him, and yourself, imprisoned. For he has descended into your prison of unbelief and anger as a Seed of indestructible Hope. His wrath upon your wrath, is infinite Mercy.

All your wrath is the product of attempting to justify yourself and your world. And his wrath on your wrath is the revelation that you have always been justified—it’s absolute Grace. Before you know it, you will see Jesus, and when you do, don’t run from the Judgment of God, run into the Judgment of God: The Holy Fire. I hope that’s why you’re here this morning, to practice.

Communion

On the night he was betrayed he took bread and broke it saying this is my body given to you, do this in remembrance of me. And in the same manner, he took the cup saying this is the covenant in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it all of you and do this in remembrance of me. And Jesus said, “if you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father.”

Benediction

We sang “for God the just is satisfied, to look on him and pardon me.” And there are a couple of ways to see that: For God the just is satisfied—what is the justice of God? It’s not that we get what we deserve but that he gets what he deserves. And what is that, well it’s children made in his own image and likeness. And he looks on him and pardons me—and where is he? Well, he’s in me; he’s descended into me. And who is he? Well, he’s the heart of the father.

You know it’s Father’s Day. I was thinking about his in the shower this morning, my experience is that Father’s Day is the lowest attended Sunday of the entire year.

Endnotes

ⁱ Tertullian

“At that greatest of all spectacles, that last and eternal judgment how shall I admire, how laugh, how rejoice, how exult, when I behold so many proud monarchs groaning in the lowest abyss of darkness; so many magistrates liquefying in fiercer flames than they ever kindled against the Christians; so many sages philosophers blushing in red-hot fires with their deluded pupils; so many tragedians more tuneful in the expression of their own sufferings; so many dancers tripping more nimbly from anguish than ever before from applause.”

“What a spectacle. . .when the world. . .and its many products, shall be consumed in one great flame! How vast a spectacle then bursts upon the eye! What there excites my admiration? What my derision? Which sight gives me joy? As I see. . .illustrious monarchs. . . groaning in the lowest darkness, Philosophers. . .as fire consumes them! Poets trembling before the judgment-seat of. . .Christ! I shall hear the tragedians, louder-voiced in their own calamity; view play-actors. . .in the dissolving flame; behold wrestlers, not in their gymnasias, but tossing in the fiery billows. . .What inquisitor or priest in his munificence will bestow on you the favor of seeing and exulting in such things as these? Yet even now we in a measure have them by faith in the picturings of imagination.” [De Spectaculis, Chapter XXX]

Augustine

“They who shall enter into [the] joy [of the Lord] shall know what is going on outside in the outer darkness. . .The saints’ . . . knowledge, which shall be great, shall keep them acquainted. . .with the eternal sufferings of the lost.” [The City of God, Book 20, Chapter 22, “What is Meant by the Good Going Out to See the Punishment of the Wicked” & Book 22, Chapter 30, “Of the Eternal Felicity of the City of God, and of the Perpetual Sabbath”]

Thomas Aquinas

In order that the happiness of the saints may be more delightful to them and that they may render more copious thanks to God for it, they are allowed to see perfectly the sufferings of the damned. . .So that they may be urged the more to praise God. . .The saints in heaven know distinctly all that happens. . .to the damned. [Summa Theologica, Third Part, Supplement, Question XCIV, “Of the Relations of the Saints Towards the Damned,” First Article, “Whether the Blessed in Heaven Will See the Sufferings of the Damned. . .”]

“The same fire” (which he decides to be material) “torments the damned in hell and the just in purgatory...The least pain in purgatory exceeds the greatest in this life.” Summa Theo. Suppl. Qu. 100, acts. 2, n. 3.

Jonathan Edwards

“The view of the misery of the damned will double the ardour of the love and gratitude of the saints of heaven.”

The sight of hell torments will exalt the happiness of the saints forever. . .Can the believing father in Heaven be happy with his unbelieving children in Hell. . . I tell you, yea! Such will be his sense of justice that it will increase rather than diminish his bliss. [“The Eternity of Hell Torments” (Sermon), April 1739 & Discourses on Various Important Subjects, 1738]

Thomas Boston, Scottish preacher, 1732

"God shall not pity them but laugh at their calamity. The righteous company in heaven shall rejoice in the execution of God's judgment, and shall sing while the smoke riseth up for ever."

Isaac Watts:

During America's "Great Awakening" the popular hymn writer, Isaac Watts (1674-1748), even set Christians' feet to tapping with this crisp little verse:

What bliss will fill the ransomed souls, When they in glory dwell, To see the sinner as he rolls, In quenchless flames of hell.

- <https://tentmaker.org/Quotes/hell-fire.htm>

ii "...Clay is fashioned into vessels; but it is on their empty hollowness, that their use depends..." - Tao Te Ching chapter 11

iii Genesis 15:16, Deuteronomy 31:17

iv The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation...

- Isaiah 59:15-16

v They need a revelation: their enemy isn't real... Or maybe we should say, their enemy really is an illusion; it's a projection of themselves judged to be themselves in their own mind.

vi So even if I try to kill him, I only trap myself in him.

I can't kill him, fix him, or save him, for him is my own judgment of me.

Every time I look in the mirror, he's still there, only a little more bloodied, and covered in a little more goo.

viii 1 Corinthians 13:12

ix This word translated "prepared beforehand" only appears here and in Ephesians 2:10: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

x Isaiah 29:16, 45:9-10

xi And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. —Ephesians 2:1-3

xii Hosea 1:6

xiii Hosea 1:8

xiv Hosea 2:15

xv Hosea 2:20

xvi Hosea 1:10

xvii Romans 5:14

xviii Romans 5:20

xix Romans 6:6, 7:24

xx Romans 5:20

xxi And it was Jesus, not me, that referred to himself as the son of Man.

Which means that y'all are his Temple, his Bride, and his Mother giving birth to a new creation... which includes you—the body of Christ.

xxii Galatians 3:16

xxiii Isaiah 6

xxiv Isaiah 53:12

xxv Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 360