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## Chapter One

# The Wrath of God

**I**n the 1960s, when I was in graduate school in Europe, I was involved in a theological discussion about the developments in theology in the twentieth century. A great debate arose over a Latin phrase that had found its way into the confessions of historic Reformation theology: *placare ira Dei*. It means “to placate the wrath of God.” The controversy had to do with how to understand the cross and specifically how to understand the atonement of Christ. Historically, Christian orthodoxy has always taught the



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following as one aspect of the atonement of Christ: Christ's sacrifice was designed to satisfy the demands of God's justice and to propitiate His wrath—that is, to assuage or to set aside His anger. The New Testament speaks of salvation in these terms, saying that Christ as our Savior has saved us from the wrath of God.

The wrath of God is a common theme in Scripture, and the Bible often speaks of Christ's atonement on the cross as satisfying God's wrath, so it may seem strange that anybody in the church would object to this phrase "to placate the wrath of God." Behind the controversy, however, was a growing trend in modern theology to deny that there is any wrath in God whatsoever. Many people don't like to think of the God of grace, love, and mercy as being given to anger, so in the liberal theology of the nineteenth century, there was a wholesale reaction against any notion of the wrath of God.

A truly biblical understanding of human anger must begin with a biblical understanding of God's anger. It may be surprising to hear that in the New Testament, the words *wrath* and *anger* occur more often with respect to God than words expressing God's love and mercy. If we want to deny the reality of the wrath of God, we're going to have to take

some very large scissors to the pages of Scripture. Even a cursory reading of the Bible will reveal that the theology of sacred Scripture takes the wrath of God seriously.

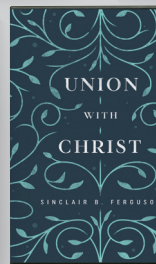
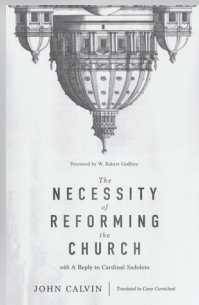
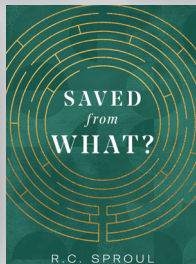
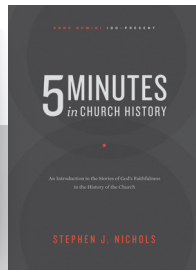
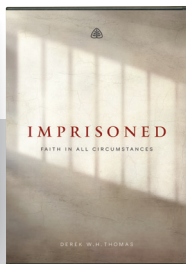
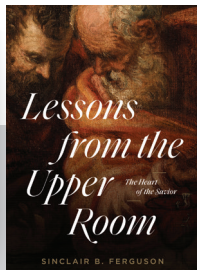
In the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, beginning at verse 18, Paul makes this observation: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.”

Note Paul’s introductory remark here: he speaks of the revelation of the wrath of God. The Greek word that is translated “wrath” is *orgē*. You may not be familiar with Greek at all, but that word might sound familiar nonetheless because of an English word that is derived from it: *orgy*.

An orgy was originally a cultic practice in the Greek and Roman pagan religions that involved uninhibited drunkenness and sexual expression. Such festivals honored the Roman god Bacchus or the Greek god Dionysius, the god of the vine or vineyard. These festivals involved excessive consumption of wine, the goal being to get drunk into a stupor in order to dull the thinking and senses and experience a spiritual kind of ecstasy.

The connection between an *orgy* and the Greek *orgē* is the idea of strong passion. When the Bible speaks of the wrath

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