

**SERMON: “Not Ashamed of the Gospel” Part 2
“The Good News of God’s Wrath”**

Feb. 21, 2010

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Almighty God, our Creator, Judge, and Redeemer, in your holy love you refuse to allow sin and injustice in any form to have the final word anywhere in your creation. In your divine faithfulness, you are relentlessly at work setting all things right. Grant now that by the power of your Spirit we may hear your word of judgment, not as threat, but as grace, assuring us that by the power of the gospel, you will indeed overcome all that mars the goodness of your creation; through Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

O. T. Lesson: Jeremiah 10:1-10

N. T. Lesson: Romans 1:18-25

After introducing himself to the church at Rome and offering words of appreciation for their faith, the Apostle Paul sounds the theme to which he will return throughout the letter, **“I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”** The gospel that Paul is not ashamed to proclaim anywhere and to anyone is the powerful word of what the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead is doing to set right that which has gone wrong in God’s good creation. The gospel Paul trumpets is a word of hope for all, Jew and Gentile alike, for it is a word of grace for all—a grace that has power to achieve all that God has promised, as through the gospel God is setting right the brokenness of creation.

But, as we quickly discover in the Letter to the Romans, there is nothing shallow or sentimental about the gospel Paul proclaims. Paul does not sing “softly and tenderly,” sweet little melodies of God’s undemanding love. With clear-eyed realism Paul looks into the chasm of Sin and Death, and makes clear what setting all things right entails—nothing less than the death and resurrection of Christ himself.

No sooner has Paul sounded his theme that the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who has faith, than immediately he declares why our only hope is in the faithfulness of God. **“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.”**

“The wrath of God is revealed...against all ungodliness and wickedness...” That’s not a theme you hear very often in Presbyterian preaching these days. That was not always the case. Once upon a time, in 1741 to be exact, Jonathan Edwards, perhaps the most brilliant theologian America has ever produced, would say in his famous, or *infamous*, sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,”

“The God that holds you over the pit of hell,
much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire,
abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked:
his wrath towards you burns like fire;
he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire;
he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight;
you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes,
than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.”¹

¹ Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Enfield Connecticut, 1741.

What do you make of that? Does it sound like gospel, good news? Unfortunately that sermon is all that most people know about Jonathan Edwards. Why it was so often included in high school and college text books on American literature, I'm not sure. The sermon does not represent Edward's theology as a whole with its mystical emphasis on the Beauty of God. Edwards preached that sermon to what he considered a hard-hearted congregation badly in need of being shaken up—and after the sermon it was. It has been said that Edwards was so focused on his manuscript, written in such tiny script as to be almost unreadable, that he never noticed how many of the congregation were fainting in sheer terror.

It has been a good while since that style of preaching was heard in Presbyterian pulpits. For sound theological reasons we have largely turned away from the kind of preaching that beats people over the head with the gospel, and that uses the gospel more as a threat than a promise. Personally, it is hard for me to understand how people can be inspired to love God with all their whole heart and soul and mind by trying to “scare the hell of them.” Terrorism is not a good theological strategy, not if the goal is to produce believers who will “glorify and enjoy God forever.” Threats of divine wrath can terrify, and to some measure, can control our misbehavior. But can they call forth from us a response of whole-hearted love for God? And can they inspire within us what Paul calls “the obedience of faith.” I seriously doubt it.

To make matters worse, consider the ways in which the wrath of God has been used by ones like Jerry Falwell to explain the destruction of Hurricane Katrina, or Pat Robertson to blame the earthquake in Haiti on a “pack with the devil” the Haitian people supposedly made a century ago. It was a meteorologist not a theologian who said that if Hurricane Katrina was a sign of God's judgment on the evil citizens of New Orleans, then the Almighty missed his target. Why did God destroy the Ninth Ward, he asked, and spare the French Quarter – where most of the supposed “evil doings” in the Big Easy were centered? At least now it seems that the Almighty has “repented” and given a much needed victory to his long-suffering “Saints.”

It is wrong to use the wrath of God to blame natural disasters on certain people or groups of people we disapprove of. **But** it is equally wrong for us in the church to ignore what is clearly taught in scripture, in Old and New Testament alike. The psalmist says, “The Lord is the true God... At his wrath the earth quakes and the nations cannot endure his indignation.” And the prophet Amos declares in the name of the Lord, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth, *therefore* I will punish you for all your iniquities.” (Amos 3:2) In the New Testament John the Baptism prepares the way for the ministry of Jesus by warning the people “to flee the wrath to come.” And Jesus himself declares to those who do not show his love in tangible ways to the hungry, the thirst, the stranger, the prisoner, **“Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”** (Mt. 25:41) As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews warns, **“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”**

We may be uncomfortable with whole idea of the wrath of God, and especially with the ways it has been misused. And yet we have clearly gone too far in the opposite direction, in rejecting what scripture teaches about the judgment of a holy and righteous God. I remember hearing Cam Murchison, the Dean at Columbia Theological Seminary, say a number of years ago that in our time we have replaced Edward's “Sinner in the Hands of an Angry God” with “Sinners in the Hands of a *Palsy-Walsy* God.” The

awesome holiness of God has been turned into the sweetness of a nice, tame little god who forgives everything and accepts everyone. We have domesticated the Lord God Almighty. The American theologian Richard Niebuhr put it this way: “A God without wrath, brought men without sin, into a kingdom without judgment, through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”²

But throughout scripture it is clear that the God of the Bible is made of sterner stuff than that. God is a righteous judge who will not tolerate unjust and wicked behavior. A footnote in the *Oxford Annotated Bible* defines “the wrath of God” as “**God’s steadfast and holy hatred of sin.**” That’s as good a definition of the wrath of God as I know of...“**God’s steadfast and holy hatred of sin.**” By his very nature God is unalterably opposed to all that warps or destroys the goodness of creation and the creatures made in God’s image. God’s hatred of sin is an expression of God’s relentless love for his rebellious creatures and his fallen creation. God’s wrath is an expression of the depth and intensity of God’s passionate rejection of everything that is contrary to his holy love.

That being said, it is clear that most of our popular images of the wrath of God do not do justice to its reality. Some of you may remember the old TV show “Maude” and how she would say to her husband, Walter, “God will get you for that!” But understood biblically the wrath of God is far more than God’s “getting us” for something we have done that is wrong. God doesn’t just “lose it” and hurl a few thunder bolts at the likes of us.

“The problem with our understanding of the wrath of God,” writes Tom Long, “is not that we have made too much of it, but precisely that we have made too little of it. Or, to be more exact, he says, we have conceived of God’s wrath in ways that are too small, too psychological. We have pictured a wrathful God as a larger version of a wrathful *us*—peevish, petty, and petulant.” Long goes on to say that because we are the most wrathful when we are the least loving, we assume the same must be true of God, and so “we have pitted the God of wrath against the God of love.” If we were given a choice between the two, we’d, of course, choose the *loving* God over the *wrathful* God every time. But that’s not a choice that is ours to make. “To the contrary,” Long says, “to speak of God’s wrath is to speak of God’s liberating and redemptive love pitted against all that opposes it, all that keep humanity captive and in slavery. God’s wrath is that expression of God’s love that will not allow victims to suffer everlastingly without hope, that will not forever abandon the helpless, that will not allow the forces that destroy and demean human life to speak the last word.”³

I find that a helpful way of considering the wrath of God. God’s wrath is not a divine “temper tantrum.” It is an expression of the tough, relentless divine love that will not let wickedness of any kind go unchecked. Wrath is God’s refusal to allow injustice to go unchallenged, or to allow us to get by with that which eats away at our souls and leads others astray. God cares enough, God loves deeply and fiercely enough, to call into judgment all that is contrary to God’s will for our lives and his creation. Wrath is one of the ways by which we, in our sinfulness, experience the burning fire of God’s holy love.

² H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, p, 193.

³ Tom Long, “Praying for the Wrath of God,” *Preaching through the Apocalypse*, ed. Rogers and Jeter, 138.

Those of us who are parents know something about that kind of love. If your child runs out into the street, you say, “Oh, I wish you wouldn’t do that.” You *stop* the child from doing it, forcefully if need be. You do it as an expression of love. Anything less would be a failure in love. We sometimes call it “tough love,” and rightly so. It can be tough on both the parent and the child, but in the long run it can be the most helpful form of love. Love has to say NO to that which is destructive to the well-being of the beloved, or it is not love at all.

That is true not only in families and in personal relationships. It is true in international relations, as well. One of the most powerful books I’ve read in recent years is Miroslav Volf’s *Exclusion and Embrace*. In it he challenges head-on what he calls “the pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.” Volf, who is from Croatia, knows all too well the horrible things of which human beings are capable. He has seen first-hand the evils of “ethnic cleansing.” Volf says, “If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence, God would not be worthy of our worship.” The only alternative to the cycles of human violence begetting more violence is the judgment of a holy and righteous God. “A nonindignant God would merely an accomplice in injustice, deception, and violence.” “The day of reckoning must come,” says Volf, “not because God is too eager to pull the trigger, but because every day of patience in a world of violence means more violence and every postponement of vindication means letting insult accompany injury.”⁴

The wrath of God is not the anger of a vengeful God that explodes when God gets fed up with us. It is the burning fire of the holy love that will not let injustice stand for ever. It is the relentless righteousness that will not let violence gain the final victory. It is the enduring faithfulness of the God who will not let human sinfulness triumph over his plan for the fullness of time to set all things right and make all things new.

Understood that way, wrath is a part of the gospel. It is the strongest expression we have of how deeply God cares for a broken world, and how passionately God is committed to setting things right. As a part of the gospel, wrath is not, and never can, be the final word. “God’s anger is but for a moment,” says the psalmist, “his favor is for a lifetime.” (Ps. 30:5) ‘For the steadfast love of the Lord endures for ever. God’s faithfulness is to all generations.’ (Ps.100:5)

The good news of the gospel is that God is at work setting the world right. By the power of the Holy Spirit we, too, are called and empowered to share in God’s great renovation of all things. Even now the risen, crucified Christ is powerfully at work in your life and mine bringing to fruition the New Creation God has promised in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The gospel is not a polite invitation that arrives in the mail to which you may or may not respond when you “get around to it.” The gospel is a **summons**, calling forth “the obedience of faith” rooted in the faithfulness of God. For it is no less than **“the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.”** Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, pp. 303, 297