

Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God
-- The Wrath and Love of the Cross
Romans 1:18

Sermon

Hobart, March 20th, 2016

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Scripture Readings:

Romans 5:6-11

⁶When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. ⁷Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. ⁸But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. ⁹And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. ¹⁰For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. ¹¹So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God.

INTRODUCTION:

I. ONE OF THE KEY QUESTIONS MANY PEOPLE HAVE, CHRISTIANS AND NON-CHRISTIANS...

A. IS ABOUT GOD'S ANGER

1. One of the most famous sermons of all time was by Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), called "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"

a) This sermon led to one of the great revivals in the 1800's and is regarded as the "most famous sermon given on American soil".

2. In it, Edwards focuses on how God is angry with sinners, and how unless they repent, he is going to mercilessly and relentlessly launch all his wrath against them, and punish them unceasingly for ever for their wickedness

a) Jamie Wheeler;

Many of his points are interrelated, but cumulatively they persuade the hearers that God's power is terrifying, that his wrath burns hot against the wicked, that the wicked stand condemned by the law and are deserving of hell, and that nothing will save them from such eternal punishment except a saving faith in Christ...What distinguishes this most famous example of Puritan revival sermons is its use of imagery so vivid that it left people in the pews trembling and weeping.

Edwards uses the word "wrath" an astonishing fifty-one times. God, he warns, will not be patient with his errant flock forever. Every day his anger at humanity's sin and indifference towards their own fate increases. Here are just a few examples of the use of "wrath" in the text:

"The wrath of God burns against them, their damnation does not slumber; the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them; the flames do now rage and glow."

“The wrath of God is like great waters that are dammed for the present; they increase more and more, and rise higher and higher, till an outlet is given; and the longer the stream is stopped, the more rapid and mighty is its course, when once it is let loose.”

"O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell." ¹

B. I REMEMBER THE CLASSIC MOVIE, “POLLYANNA”

1. And how the preacher in the local church continually berated the congregations, threatening them will hell-fire and brimstone.
 - a) Pollyanna talks to the firebrand minister and tells him that her father had noted over 800 verses in the Bible in which God tells us to rejoice or be glad or be happy.
 - b) She tells him that “if the Lord took the trouble to tell us 800 times that he wants us to rejoice, then He must really mean it”.²
2. Most people are put off by the idea of an angry, wrathful God who punishes those who reject him with unrelenting, fierce, torturous and agonising suffering
3. One of the new Atheists main complaints about Christianity is, “How could a loving God have his son killed?”
4. So our questions are;

C. IS GOD ANGRY AND WRATHFUL, SEEKING TO PUNISH SINNERS?

1. And on the other hand, if God is so loving,
 - a) couldn't he have saved us without having to send Jesus to die for us?

¹ Jamie Wheeler, enotes, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God Summary; <http://www.enotes.com/topics/sinners-hands-an-angry-god>

² Pollyanna, Walt Disney, 1960

b) Couldn't he just have forgiven us by simply saying "I forgive you"?

D. PRAYER

BODY:

II. HOW CAN A LOVING GOD BE A GOD OF WRATH?

A. IN ROMANS 1:18 PAUL DECLARES THAT, "

18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness."

B. WHAT IS IT, THAT GOD'S WRATH IS AGAINST?

1. "All godlessness"
2. And "wickedness"

C. "GODLESSNESS" = LIVING WITHOUT GOD

1. God created all that isn't God
2. He himself is a loving union of Father, Son and Spirit
3. What was his purpose in creation?
 - a) To include others in his life of loving communion, unity, harmony and creativity, joy and peace.

D. "WICKEDNESS"

Romans 1:18b "wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness."

1. This takes us back to the original lie and the original sin,
2. What was the original lie?
 - a) You can take of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and not die, in fact you can be like God by living for yourself, by yourself (Gen 3:1-5)

3. This ties in with a proper understanding of the definition and true nature of sin,

a) Which is "lawlessness (I John 3:4)

b) It is living without reference to anyone greater than ourselves, living as if there is no God, no good and evil, no judgment

4. So, (Rom 1:18) the wrath of God is revealed as being

18 against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness."

5. God is clearly against all that denies and opposes the truth. Against the wickedness of those who try to stop others hearing the truth

6. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, the revelation and representation of the Father

E. PAUL TAUGHT AGAINST THOSE WHO TURNED GOOD NEWS INTO NOT GOOD NEWS IN GALATIANS

Galatians 1:6

⁶ I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God, who called you to himself through the loving mercy of Christ.* You are following a different way that pretends to be the Good News ⁷ but is not the Good News at all. You are being fooled by those who deliberately twist the truth concerning Christ.

⁸ Let God's curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who preaches a different kind of Good News than the one we preached to you.

⁹ I say again what we have said before: If anyone preaches any other Good News than the one you welcomed, let that person be cursed.

F. JESUS, ALSO OPPOSED, OFTEN ANGRILY, THOSE WHO SUPPRESSED THE TRUTH

1. Jesus wrath and anger was rarely displayed, but when it was who was it turned upon?

Matthew 15:12-14

* 1:6 Some manuscripts read *through loving mercy*.

¹² Then the disciples came to him and asked, “Do you realize you offended the Pharisees by what you just said?”

¹³ Jesus replied, “Every plant not planted by my heavenly Father will be uprooted, ¹⁴ so ignore them. They are blind guides leading the blind, and if one blind person guides another, they will both fall into a ditch.”

2. Again the reason for anger is that these are people who are distorting the truth about who God is, and his nature and purposes for his creation
3. They make God out to be someone who he isn't, which then turns people away from him who desperately need him in their lives

III. GOD'S WRATH AND HIS LOVE

A. I JOHN 4:8 AND THE WHOLE OF SCRIPTURE AND JESUS, GOD IN THE FLESH, ALL WITNESS TO THE ULTIMATE TRUTH ABOUT WHO GOD IS

1. That “God is love”
2. God's wrath, like all his attributes, is an expression of his being, which is love
 - a) His anger is part of his love towards his children and his creation
 - b) It is the protective nature of God to be against that which is against our welfare
 - c) And that welfare is totally tied up with our relationship with him
3. God as loving Father, through Christ, judges and opposes the evil that hurts his people by separating them from their source of love and life

B. HOW IS GOD'S WRATH AND ANGER EXPRESSED AGAINST EVIL AND SIN?

1. He acted against it ultimately and completely at the cross
2. Paul tells us in Romans is that God has already accomplished this judgment against sin and evil through the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of his Son, Jesus Christ.
3. In Christ, God poured out his wrath on all sin and its consequences, opposing, suffering and absorbing its results, and winning victory over it.
4. And through Christ, God's wrath is ended - the enmity, the division and hostility humanity created between itself and God through sin, is ended.

Romans 5:6-11

⁶When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. ⁷Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. ⁸But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. ⁹And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. ¹⁰For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. ¹¹So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God.

C. THROUGH CHRIST, PARTICULARLY HIS CRUCIFIXION, GOD HAS TAKEN UPON HIMSELF THE JUST PUNISHMENT AND END RESULT OF LIVING APART FROM GOD IN SIN

1. This is the heart of the gospel
2. The law proclaimed a loud No! to our No! It condemned us and proclaimed punishment and death upon us!
3. But Christ, the lamb of God, stood in our place, taking upon himself the condemnation and wrath of the law against us

4. In Jesus, in spite of our No's to God, we are forgiven

(1) In Jesus, God says YES to us, in spite of our life of NO! towards him

5. And Jesus' YES to God, his life of perfect faithfulness to the Father through the Spirit, is given on our behalf

a) v 11

¹¹ So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God.

Romans 5:18-21

¹⁸ Yes, Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone.

¹⁹ Because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners. But because one other person obeyed God, many will be made righteous.

²⁰ God's law was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became more abundant. ²¹ So just as sin ruled over all people and brought them to death, now God's wonderful grace rules instead, giving us right standing with God and resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Ephesians 2:1-10

Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. ² You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world.* He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. ³ All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God's anger, just like everyone else.

⁴ But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, ⁵ that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) ⁶ For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. ⁷ So God can point to us in all future

* **2:2** Greek *obeying the commander of the power of the air*.

ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus.

⁸ God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. ⁹ Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. ¹⁰ For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

IV. GOD'S LOVE ACTS, IT ISN'T JUST A SENTIMENT

A. GOD'S LOVE ISN'T JUST A SENTIMENT OR A NICE FEELING

1. God's grace and loving forgiveness is more than just the words, "I forgive you", or "I love you"
2. Love is God's being and his way of acting in all things
 - a) Thomas McCall

God's love is a *holy* love. "It cannot be reduced to sentimentality or indulgence; it does not ignore or brush away or indulge our sinfulness. Instead God expresses his love in a way pointed directly at our sin" ³

B. JESUS' DEATH IS GOD'S LOVE IN ACTION

1. God's loving wrath, his actions to oppose and remove evil from the world, and our lives, is real
 - a) Reconciliation and atonement came about, not by words, or emotion, but through God himself, the Son in the flesh, living as one of us, as all of us, as the second Adam, overcoming temptation to live apart from God, and living faithfully through the Holy Spirit in full communion with the Father, every day and moment of his life
2. Ted Johnston,

³ Thomas H. McCall, *Forsaken*, Intervarsity Press, 2012, p. 57

That saving work was carried out as “loving wrath” against sinfulness and for us as persons. Because all humanity has been included “in Christ,” no person is the object of God's wrath - God has reconciled himself to all.

...human beings by nature are God’s enemies and this animosity causes a necessary and spontaneous countermeasure from a holy and loving God – his wrath. But from the beginning, God has purposed out of his love to end the human-caused wrath through sin by the saving work of Christ. It is through God’s love that we are reconciled to him in his own saving work in the death and life of his Son ([Romans 5:9-10](#); [John 3:16](#)).⁴

3. If God didn’t war against sin, if he had now “wrath” against it, then he wouldn’t have acted out of love by sending Christ to reconcile us and give us new life with him.

4. As Ted Johnston adds,

In summary, when speaking of “God’s wrath” it is important to consider how it is that God purposed to eliminate it. We thank God that God’s wrath disappears when sin is conquered and destroyed. We have assurance in the promise of his peace toward us because he has once and for all dealt with sin in Christ. God has reconciled us to himself in the saving work of his Son, thus ending his wrath through reconciliation, as it were. God’s “wrath” against sin and sinfulness is presupposed in his sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to personally win the final victory over this enemy of God. If God did not war against all forms of sinfulness – if he had no “wrath” against it – he would have seen no need to send his Son in human form as Jesus ([John 1:1, 14](#)) to destroy this enemy of his very Being and his purpose in man.

C. LOVE DOESN'T IGNORE EVIL ABUSES TO GO UNADDRESSED

1. God in his love is just

a) He will not allow the suffering of so many, and equally the abuses and evil acts of those who caused the suffering to be idly dismissed with just a word

⁴ Ted Johnston

2. Miroslav Volf is a highly respected Trinitarian Theologian who suffered through the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia

“I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn’t God love? Shouldn’t divine love be beyond wrath?”

God is love, and God loves every person and every creature. That’s exactly why God is wrathful against some of them. My last resistance to the idea of God’s wrath was a casualty of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3,000,000 were displaced. My villages and cities were destroyed, my people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry.

Or think of Rwanda in the last decade of the past century, where 800,000 people were hacked to death in one hundred days! How did God react to the carnage? By doting on the perpetrators in a grandfatherly fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath but instead affirming the perpetrators’ basic goodness? Wasn’t God fiercely angry with them?

Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God’s wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn’t wrathful at the sight of the world’s evil. God isn’t wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love.”⁵

3. Before we conclude, let us look at two approaches that can get in the way of our focus on the love of God, and the message of grace that is the true centre of the Gospel, and of our lives and our worship, our faith and our hope in life in Christ

⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*, Zondervan, 2006, p.138-139

V. "SIN" OR "SALVATION" FOCUSED

A. IS OUR PRIMARY FOCUS "SIN" OR "SALVATION"?

1. Do we see people primarily as sinners, or as God's beloved children?

B. MANY RELIGIOUS PEOPLE HAVE PREACHED A MESSAGE THAT IS SIN ORIENTED, AND FOCUSES ON GOD'S WRATH

1. You remember the classic catch cry,
 - a) "Flee from the wrath to come!"
2. The focus then becomes, like the Pharisees, like preacher in Pollyanna and the sermon of Jonathan Edwards
 - a) The message that is most passionately and loudly spoken and lived is one of condemnation and criticism, and that is the message that is heard by the world around us
 - (1) And what is their reaction?
3. But the message isn't the bad news that we are "sinners in the hands of an angry God"

C. THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT WE ARE "SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF A LOVING GOD",

1. A loving God who has acted already to save us from sin through Jesus Christ, his Son, and who continues to love us, and rescue us from what he is against, which is our living apart from him
 - a) Rescuing us from the pain and suffering such sinful living leads to
2. Jesus' message is that God loves us, and has already acted against sin and all that hurts us in his loving wrath and anger, on the cross
 - a) Sin has been defeated, all we need to do is accept the victory
 - (1)

D. ALL PEOPLE ARE HELD IN GOD'S LOVING HANDS, AND FREED FROM CONDEMNATION,

1. The gospel we are given to embrace, rejoice in, live and share, is not “repent or burn”, or “flee from the wrath to come!”

a) But is the call to understand and accept the depth and unconditional nature of God’s love towards them, and allow God to embrace and free them from their life without him, and include them in his life.⁶

E. SECONDLY; TOO OFTEN GOD IS PICTURED AS FIXING THE WORLD’S EVILS AND BRINGING SALVATION BY PURE FORCE, VIOLENCE AND WAR

1. As George Pfleiderer says, this would mean God suspends his just and loving character in order to defeat evil

2. He writes, that in that case;

it is merely power, and not the interior, supremely moral quality of God, through which God overwhelms evil. ...In this model, the good power defeats the evil force with its own weapons. ...this would mean that God accepts the rules of evil, which are war and not peace, hate and not love.

Setting the grounds for an order in which life, peaceful life, is possible, is the first attribute and work of the Trinitarian God; as such, it is also the basic idea of atonement.

The atonement provided in Jesus Christ, with its power of a new creation, overcomes ‘structural evil’ in all its forms and disguises, estrangement, self-estrangement, unjust structures in the political and social orders of societies—which seem beyond the reach of individual actions.⁷

3. So just as God’s love is not mere sentiment or nice feelings, but enacted deeds of self-sacrifice and effective care and saving of his people,

a) so God’s acts of wrath and justice against evil, are real and effective in ridding us of it and its consequences

⁶ Inside that message, is then included God’s loving, wrathful dealing with evil that harms his people

⁷ Georg Pfleiderer, ‘The Atonement’, chapter in *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology*, ed. Paul Louis Metzger, t&t clark, 2005, p.132-133.

4. But they are not carnal, human-like acts of violent feeling or action

5. Stephen Seamands makes this clear;

“Through the cross, God overcomes evil, not through brute strength, not through coercion or manipulation, not through a dazzling display of force, but through the power of suffering love, God uses suffering redemptively to accomplish his will and his purpose in the world and in our lives.”⁸

a) As Torrance describes, God’s act of judgment takes place powerfully and totally through Christ’s loving sacrifice on the cross

6. Tom Torrance;

In the incarnate life of Jesus, and above all in his death, God does not execute his judgement on evil simply by smiting it violently away by a stroke of his hand, but by entering into it from within, into the very heart of the blackest evil, and making its sorrow and guilt and suffering his own. And it is because it is God himself who enters in, in order to let the whole of human evil go over him, that his intervention in meekness has violent and explosive force. It is the very power of God.

And so the cross with all its incredible meekness and patience and compassion is no deed of passive and beautiful heroism simply, but the most potent and aggressive deed that heaven and earth have ever known; the attack of God’s holy love upon the inhumanity of man and the tyranny of evil upon all the piled up contradiction of sin.^[2]

⁸ Stephen Seamands, *Give Them Christ*, p. 72

^[2] Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, Robert T. Walker, editor; Paternoster/IVP Academic, Milton-Keynes, UK, 2008, p. 150

CONCLUSION

VI. THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT GOD HAS ALREADY ACTED AGAINST SIN AND EVIL

A. HE ENACTED HIS ANGER AND WRATH AGAINST THEM IN PURE LOVE, FULLY AND TOTALLY DEFEATING EVIL AT THE CROSS

1. Michael Jinkins sums this all up

Christ did not come to change the mind of an angry God but to reveal the loving heart of God toward all God's rebellious children.⁹

The Gospels think of the incarnation as the invasion of the mighty Son of God into our domain where evil has come to exercise its sway, in order to break its bonds and to deliver us from its captivity. That is the significance of the whole life of Jesus, particularly from his temptations immediately after his baptism to the agony of Gethsemane and Calvary.

...How did he achieve redemption? The Gospels make it clear that he met and overcame the powers of darkness by his holiness, as the holy one of God. ...By his very holiness and perfect obedience sin had no power over him, and it was therefore as the holy one in entire fulfillment of the holy will of God that he invaded the domain of evil and redeemed us out of the power of darkness by his holy life and his holy submission to the Father's will even unto the death of the cross.

. ...he came through the temptation and passion of his self sacrifice on the cross clothed with the power of the resurrection, *Christus victor*, Christ Triumphant, endowed with all power in heaven and earth.

2. Let us always be encouraged and thankful that we are not sinners in the hands of a loving God, but forgiven sinners in the hands of a loving God

a) And let us share in Jesus' mission of living and sharing that good news with the suffering world around us

B. PRAYER

⁹ Michael Jinkins, *Invitation to Theology*, InterVarsity Press, 2001, p. 149