

Facing the just anger of God

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[0 : 00] So our reading is Joshua chapter 7, and we'll read from the beginning of the chapter. But the Israelites were unfaithful in regard to the devoted things.

Achan, son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them. So the Lord's anger burned against Israel. Now, Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth-Avon, to the east of Bethel, and told them, go up and spy out the region.

So the men went up and spied out Ai. When they returned to Joshua, they said, not all the army will have to go up against Ai. Send two or three thousand men to take it, and do not weary the whole army, for only a few people live there.

So about three thousand went up, but they were routed by the men of Ai, who killed about thirty-six of them. And they chased the Israelites from the city gate as far as the stone quarries and struck them down on the slopes.

At this, the hearts of the people melted in fear and became like water. Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell face down to the ground before the ark of the Lord remaining there till evening.

[1 : 09] The elders of Israel did the same and sprinkled dust on their heads. And Joshua said, alas, sovereign Lord, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us?

If only we'd been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan. Pardon your servant, Lord. What can I say now that Israel has been routed by its enemies? The Canaanites and the other people of the country will hear about this and they will surround us and wipe out our name from the earth.

What then will you do for your own great name? The Lord said to Joshua, stand up. What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned. They have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep.

They have taken some of the devoted things. They have stolen. They have lied. They have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies. They turn their backs and run because they've been made liable to destruction.

I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction. Go, consecrate the people. Tell them. Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow.

[2 : 14] For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says. There are devoted things among you, Israel. You cannot stand against your enemies until you remove them. In the morning, present yourselves tribe by tribe.

The tribe that the Lord chooses shall come forward clan by clan. The clan that the Lord chooses shall come forward family by family. And the family that the Lord chooses shall come forward man by man. Whoever is caught with the devoted things shall be destroyed by fire, along with all that belongs to him.

He has violated the covenant of the Lord and has done an outrageous thing in Israel. Early the next morning, Joshua made Israel come forward by tribes and Judah was chosen. The clans of Judah came forward and the Zerahites were chosen.

He made the clan of the Zerahites come forward by families and Zimri was chosen. Joshua made his family come forward man by man. And Achan, son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was chosen.

Then Joshua said to Achan, my son, give glory to the Lord, the God of Israel, and honour him. Tell me what you have done. Do not hide it from me. Achan replied, it's true.

[3 : 18] I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel. This is what I have done. When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them.

They are hidden in the ground inside my tent with the silver underneath. So Joshua sent messengers and they ran to the tent and there it was, hidden in his tent with the silver underneath. They took the things from the tent, brought them to Joshua and all the Israelites and spread them out before the Lord.

Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan's son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold bar, his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had to the valley of Ahor.

Joshua said, why have you brought this trouble on us? The Lord will bring trouble on you today. Then all Israel stoned him and after they'd stoned the rest, they burned them. Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day.

Then the Lord turned from his fierce anger. Therefore that place has been called the valley of Ahor, the valley of trouble, ever since. So here we are in our story of Joshua, the book that's all about the God who saves.

[4 : 32] But we find ourselves facing the justice and anger of God. So what do we do with it? What do we do with the anger of God?

Here is what Richard Dawkins does with it. Richard Dawkins, who is no friend of Christianity, he says that God breaks into a monumental rage whenever his chosen people flirt with a rival God.

The accusation that Dawkins and others level against God is that he is impatient, he's petty, he's easily angered. The judgment of God.

The judgment of God. So we saw the judgment of God last week against Jericho. This week we see it against his own people. It turns some away from God. They dismiss him as primitive or dismiss him as intolerant.

So how do we, as the people of God, how do Christian people begin to understand texts like this? How do we respond to the claim that God is a moral monster?

[5 : 38] So our plan is this. First, we're going to look at the story itself. Recognizing that this is a story that's both framed by and focused on God's holy anger.

And we can see that because, look with me at verse 1, what do we find? We find the Lord's anger burned against Israel. Go to the end of the chapter, verse 26.

Then the Lord turned from his fierce anger and right in the middle, verse 12, the outcome of this anger. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction.

So the anger of God is there. Secondly, we're going to consider in more detail three crucial truths. One, the nature of human sin, which is worse than we think.

We're going to consider, secondly, the reality of God's just anger, which is fairer than we think. And thirdly, to recognize the hope of God's mercy.

- [6 : 42] That having done the previous two, it would seem more glorious than we think or could even imagine. We need to let God's word determine our approach to this topic, to be humble and to be open to having our thinking corrected as we come to this topic.
- But let's first of all look at the story, because this is a story of God's anger against sinful rebellion. You can see it in four scenes. Scene one, where God's anger is felt. This is the first five verses.
- Chapter six, Israel has been the agents of God's justice, delivering God's justice against the sin of Jericho. But now the Israelites have been what?
- Verse one, they've been unfaithful. And so they feel God's anger. Now, there's a marriage image here. The people of Israel are in covenant with God. Think of a husband who is jealous or angry at being betrayed or rejected.
- Israel has been unfaithful. And there's a corporate impact. So we're told clearly from the beginning, Achan has sinned, but it's a spreading disease, sin.
- [7 : 48] The land has been made unholy. The people have been made unclean and unholy. And God is angry. They attempt phase two of their conquest.
- Jericho was a resounding victory. A.I. looks easier, but is a resounding humiliation. They run with their tail between their legs. The cause of the defeat is clearly shown.
- It's the Lord's anger that burned against them. And the outcome, by verse five, is that the hearts of the people melted in fear.
- Now, previously, that had been said of the enemy nations. For example, in chapter five, verse one, when the Amorite kings and all the Canaanite kings heard how the Lord had dried up the Jordan, their hearts melted in fear.
- But now that's true of the people of God. Now, it's very important for us to recognize that in the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Bible is really clear on this, if we are in Christ, there is no condemnation for us.
- [8 : 52] But when we sin, we will, as Christians, feel the fatherly displeasure of God. We will lose a sense of his presence.
- We will lose his smile, as it were. And that is a huge loss, and the people of God are feeling that. Now, scene two, the impact of God's anger.
- God's anger causes confusion. We see that especially in Joshua. Joshua's response, verse six, he tore his clothes, fell face down to the ground before the ark of the Lord, and the elders did the same.
- It's grief, it's mourning, it's lament. He falls before the ark, he falls, in other words, before God in repentance. And the elders, they do the same. So Joshua understands God is judge, God has authority, God does what is good and right.
- God has the wisdom to discern what's going on and to act appropriately. God has the power to act and to execute judgment. And that's what leads him to what we might call complaint or lament, like the lament psalms we looked at last year.
- [10 : 00] And these come within the context of this covenant promise. So remember at this point, Joshua doesn't realise what Achan has done. So in the context of the covenant, Joshua is confused and he's lamenting.
- God, we expected this, we expected to receive and enjoy the promised land and life in your presence. But we get this, we get humiliation and defeat, and they don't know how to process.
- But what he does is he appeals to God's honour, to God's name, verse nine. The Canaanites and the other people of the country will hear about this and they will surround us and wipe out our name from the earth.

What then will you do for your own great name? If the name of your people is dragged through the mud, if the people of God are destroyed, how will you receive honour? And so he appeals to God's honour.

I find this is really helpful. Maybe we find ourselves thoroughly confused by circumstances, current or otherwise, and we're not sure how to act. Well, here's a good biblical response.

[11 : 02] Come before God. Lament. As a child of God, I expected this, but here's this. What will you do for your honour here?

It's a wonderful question to ask, a wonderful prayer to make. In the next scene, scene three, verses 10 to 15, God's anger is revealed.

So remember, Achan said hidden up until this point, but verse 10, the Lord said to Joshua, stand up. What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned. They have violated my covenant.

They've stolen some of the devoted things. They've stolen. They've lied. They've put them with their own possession. So here's the cause of the defeat now being revealed. They have violated the covenant. The people are entirely to blame.

God has been faithful. The people have been faithless. They've stolen. They've lied. They've coveted something that actually belongs to God. Remember, this is direct rebellion. This is robbing of God.

[12 : 00] The last thing the people of God heard before going into battle, Joshua chapter 6. Remember, this is devoted to the Lord. We met in chapter 5, the commander of the Lord.

Do you remember that? Joshua meets this most likely and appearing of God in human form as the commander of the Lord. And Joshua says, are you with us? Are you with our enemies? And he says, neither.

I'm on the Lord's side. So he'd been for them when they were faithful and obedient to God. Now that they have turned their back on God, the commander of the Lord is against them in their sin. We cannot presume on God's mercy.

In verse 13 to 50, we see the verdict. The people are told that you won't be able to stand against your enemies until rebellion has been dealt with.

Until, in verse 15, whoever is caught with the devoted things shall be destroyed by fire. He has violated the covenant and done an outrageous thing. And they're warned of the greatest threat of all.

[13 : 04] That if they don't deal with this, verse 12, I will not be with you anymore. The people of God would be without the presence of God. This is serious. But even in this, recognize this.

God is revealing his anger and the cause for it. There's a glimpse of his mercy. Why is this sin being revealed? So that it might be dealt with.

So that God's favor might be restored. God is revealed. Some people in society, some people even in the church, have the notion that God will forgive me.

That's his job. You know, we imagine mercy is our automatic right. Or if it's just for the good people, well, certainly we're the good people. And the justice of God shocks us.

According to the Bible, the truth is that mercy is optional to God. Justice is what we deserve. There is no one good, not one. The real scandal is that anyone, Israel then, us today, that anyone is saved in the light of our outrageous sin against our perfect, holy, loving creator God.

[14 : 11] Fourth scene. Verse 16 to 26. God's severe anger is displayed. Verse 16 to 18. The Lord is choosing. Remember, the context is holy war.

The Lord arranges that Achan is taken. It's like God captures him. Achan is God's enemy by his actions. And Joshua says to Achan in verse 19, give glory to God.

Confess your sin. How does confession bring glory? Because it reveals the horror of his sin, of his direct rebellion against God. And it shows that God's verdict against him is justified.

Verse 22 to 25. The verdict is passed. The sentence is carried out. Achan and all his are destroyed. God's severe anger is displayed.

The outcome. Verse 26. The Lord turned from his fierce anger. The people once more enjoy favour as they have dealt with sin in the camp.

[15 : 15] If God is to be present with his people, if the holy God is to be among his people, then that destructive judgment of what is sinful, of what is unclean, must take place.

And that's what we see. One of the concerns of justice, one of the questions we ask is, does the punishment fit the crime?

And often if we're honest, we read passages like this. God's judgment staggers us, perhaps shocks us. Because we fail to reckon with who God is and what our sin is like.

And I think it also shocks us because our justice is inconsistent. You know, sometimes, think about a family situation, sometimes we can be quite lenient or sometimes maybe we can be lazy about discipline.

It feels like more hassle than it's worth sometimes. Other times we're on full on, ah, Christmas is cancelled mode. You know, it just gets too much. And so we're inconsistent. But that's not true with God.

[16 : 21] God doesn't grade on a curve. God has a perfect straight line of righteous judgment. His standard is perfect and righteous. So he never condemns the innocent. He never clears the guilty.

He is never too harsh. So we ask ourselves the question, was Achan's punishment wrong? Was God unfair to Achan?

We need to be very careful in how we answer. Careful so that we do not slander God. Careful that we do not claim a higher standard of justice or wisdom than God.

And I think we need to look more closely at sin and justice so that we will also appreciate the mercy of God. So that's what we're going to do now. Let's consider the nature of our sin.

How does Joshua chapter 7 teach us about sin? A number of things we can see. Verse 1, we recognise sin is not hidden from God.

[17 : 28] What have we got? We've got Achan. He's literally burying his sin, burying his treasure. But God saw and God revealed. So we can wear masks. We can keep up appearances before others.

But our hearts, they are not hidden from God. Joshua 7 also teaches us that sin provokes God's anger.

Now you might have the question, isn't anger wrong? Isn't anger unworthy of God? I recognise this is not like us flying off the handle, sort of exploding with steam coming out of our ears.

This is, to use J.I. Packer's definition, God's anger is a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil.

God must react to evil. We need a God who cares about justice. What else can we say about sin? Sin is, to use the language of verse 11, is to violate God's covenant.

[18 : 36] So we need to recognise whoever we are, wherever we are, all of us live under the lordship of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now whether we like it or not, whether we're Christians or not, that's a reality. Jesus is king of kings and lord of lords. And as such, we owe him covenant loyalty, obedience and love.

Whether we do it or not, that's what we owe to him. And to fail in that is to violate the covenant, God's covenant.

What is sin in that context? It's interesting that Achan recognises this. Achan replied, it is true. I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel.

It's David's confession in Psalm 51. It's you, you only have I sinned. R.C. Sproul puts it so graphically. Sin is cosmic treason against a perfectly pure king.

[19 : 40] An act of supreme ingratitude to the God who made us and gives us life and gives us everything and extends the offer of salvation to us in Jesus.

Sin is treason and ingratitude. And also, because we are created as God's image-bearers, to sin is to slander our God.

We are presenting a false image of God to the world. We are saying, God is like me. God is sinful and he lies and he covets and he cheats and he steals. And he's wicked like I am.

So sin violates the covenant. Sin also deserves destruction. That's the point of verse 15.

Whoever is caught with the devoted things shall be destroyed because he has violated the covenant. God is not cruel to Achan or to us.

[20 : 42] Achan knew he was robbing God. Achan chose darkness over light. Achan chose to reject his God. If we choose to reject Jesus and his salvation, God is just in punishing us.

When we consider the nature of our sin, surely the only proper response is to turn away from it, to repent of it, to confess it to God, that he would forgive it in Christ, that we would hate our sin as Christians, that we would battle against those evil desires.

We would recognise that radical surgery is required to deal with this poison that infects everything. And that sin would point us to our need of a saviour, to the good news of the cross.

We also must consider further the reality of God's just anger. Did you know that the Bible speaks more of God's judgment than it does of his love?

God as judge is a clear theme both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Think about some of the famous stories of the Old Testament. We've got the Garden of Eden. There is judgment against sin and rebellion.

[22 : 11] There is the flood as a response to everybody, barring Noah, turning against God. There is the judgment on Pharaoh and Egypt.

There is judgment on God's people by sending them into exile because of their idolatry and disobedience and covenant breaking. And what about the New Testament? Remember what we read, Acts 17? The day of the Lord returning as judge overshadows the whole New Testament.

The teaching of Jesus, the parables of Jesus present him as the judge before whom people will stand. The one who can say, well done, good and faithful servant, or who can throw people into the outer darkness.

Jesus is presented as saviour and as judge. And the big picture of justice in the Bible is that all of us, again whether we acknowledge God or not, all of us are accountable.

Justice, the justice of God will finally triumph. That those prayers and cries and laments, how long, O Lord, they will one day be answered. That justice will finally be done.

[23 : 17] That good will ultimately prevail. That God will establish a new heavens and a new earth that will flourish in perfect righteousness. God and his people there and no sin there.

History is moving towards that goal and God's will will be done because he is the righteous judge. All that to say to reject the justice of God.

I don't like this message of judgment. It means we're going to need to start ripping out so much of our Bible. And actually, if we don't like the message of God's justice, we'll need to rip out the message of the cross.

Where we discover the justice of God that doesn't fall on us. It falls on Jesus as he becomes sin bearer so that we might receive mercy.

Abraham once asked God in Genesis 17, It shall not the judge of all the earth do right? And the answer is a clear yes.

[24 : 21] Because for God to overlook sin, for God to overlook injustice, or for God to care about justice less than us, or for God not to care that his people are unfaithful to him, would lead us to have someone who's really no God at all.

Our God is just and righteous. So that Romans chapter 3 verse 19, As we stand before him, every mouth will be silenced and the whole world will be held accountable to God.

In God's courtroom, there is no miscarriage of justice that will happen. Standing before Jesus the judge, we can be sure that the verdict will be right.

And we can also be sure there will be no defence. We'll have nothing to say. If we sin by rejecting God's salvation, by rejecting God's son.

When we come to the issue of the justice of God and we want to reject it, so often it's because our vision is faulty.

[25 : 35] So that our concept of our sin and God's holiness and God's justice are too small.

We don't see them as we ought to. And on the flip side, our view of our goodness and our right to mercy are seen to be too big.

The last thing we need to do, because Joshua 7 invites us to, and the flow of the Bible and the gospel invites us to, is to consider the hope of God's mercy.

We've seen the reality of sin and we've seen the reality of God's justice. And we feel, I hope, that something of the weight of that.

But now we need to consider the hope of God's mercy. R.C. Sproul, again, in his book, The Holiness of God, said a very striking thing. He said, the Old Testament law is one of astonishing grace.

[26 : 44] Now, if you've read the Old Testament, you may be thinking, how can we talk about astonishing grace in the Old Testament? How can we talk about astonishing grace in Joshua 7? Well, think about this for a moment.

Think about the reality that Achan and his family are not the only sinners that day. In the book of Ezekiel, the truth is revealed that the soul that sins, that soul shall die.

Every sin, every person deserves the sentence of eternal death. It is mercy that it's only Achan and his family that are destroyed because all Israel sinned against God, just like all of us sin against God.

Mercy, too, is seen in Joshua 7 in that that destructive judgment that comes allows God's mercy and favour to return to his people, allows them to enjoy his presence once more.

What's the goal of their salvation? that they would be in God's place and joy, God's presence and blessing. That's our ultimate hope as well, that we enjoy God's presence now where we look forward to it forever in the new heavens and the new earth.

[28 : 13] So we see mercy being extended beyond judgment. And it's even more so when we consider the cross of the Lord Jesus.

There's the ultimate hope of God's mercy where we also see sin being dealt with and justice on display. J.I. Packer in the book *Knowing God* points out that between us sinners and the thunder clouds of divine wrath stands the cross of the Lord Jesus.

The cross is the most extreme example of God's anger at sin and God's holy justice.

So what is happening there at the cross? We have Jesus, the perfectly innocent righteous one who willingly becomes sin.

The innocent one gladly for his people, for our salvation, goes under the just judgment of God and as he takes on sin, as he becomes sin, he becomes a curse.

[29 : 25] The Father cannot bear to look at him. Sin is ugly. Jesus has become an obscene thing in the sight of his Father.

And Jesus dies in our place. Jesus dies for the ways that you and I in our life we rob God God, by idolatry, by worshipping and living for things other than God.

He dies for the way we rob God of worship when we worship and value and have our priorities set by something other than God. Jesus dies for all the ways that we break his commandments, for the ways where we lie, for the things that we steal.

Jesus dies for the way we smash his covenant, for the treason that we are guilty of, for the slander that we commit against God.

Jesus becomes sin for us. And there on the cross is revealed the justice of God as Jesus is punished for sin.

[30 : 35] But there too is revealed the loving mercy of God. as Jesus comes as a substitute taking our sin and its punishment on himself.

Jesus dying as a sacrifice that his blood might cleanse us and atone for sin and forgive our sin. So that as we are aware of the reality of sin in our lives what do we need to do?

We need to run to Jesus and put our faith and trust in him and to know that in him we enjoy the favour of God, the presence of God.

We know that we will not finally be condemned by God. Let's return to where we began. Richard Dawkins had that put down.

God breaks into a monumental rage whenever his chosen people flirt with a rival God. what we learned as to what we should do with the anger of God.

[31 : 43] We should recognise that the holy God has a settled hatred of sin, that sin is no small thing, it's a serious thing, it's treason, it's rebellion, it's slander, it deserves death. We should recognise that God has a perfect standard of righteousness, a standard we fail to meet daily.

And so we should praise God for grace and mercy available in Jesus instead of the justice we deserve. that we would take care, that we wouldn't miss out, that we wouldn't miss the warning in the story of Achan, that we wouldn't take God's mercy for granted, rather we turn to Jesus and be saved and live with grateful obedience now and forever.

God. In the spirit. Indigenous telephone and hearing and those things in the beginning that we are on the goods and our ahead and together as part of a natural oppure we can tryurger apart and potentially to the