

The Wrath Problem

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 June 2018

Preacher: Rev. James Wagner

[0 : 00] Now, please pray with me. God, would you continue to give us the grace that we need to hear your word and to know you for who you are and to hold nothing back in worshipping you.

Fill us now with your spirit. In Christ's name we pray. Amen. Now, please be seated. As you're being seated, I want to turn to your Bible again, to that passage in Isaiah, the 28th verse.

And as I said, we're in this sermon series, which is called The Problem with Christianity. And I don't know if you're one of them who might echo that phrase, that you have a problem with Christianity.

And if not you, maybe some of your family members, friends, neighbors, maybe a few foes, I don't know. But we're trying to address some of the problems that people do have with Christianity presently and have in the past.

And last week it was the problem with the exclusivity of Christianity, and today it's with the wrath of God. And you know that the wrath of God is not a desirable for some and popular subject, though it is worth noting and being reminded that probably one of the most well-known sermons preached in North America by Jonathan Edwards was called Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.

[1 : 49] And I went to a website this past week, it's called Sermon Audio, and still it tracks with the most number of interest in reading that above all other sermons.

It's just quite incredible how much interest that subject has generated, and we're thinking that it still does. It's a problem for people. Now, while there are definitive statements about God in the Bible like God is love, light, spirit, consuming fire, even a warrior, the Bible also presents us with the reality that God displays his wrath.

This is often avoided or misunderstood. For instance, it's commonly thought that the Old Testament represents a God of wrath, and the New Testament represents a God of love.

In fact, this binary caricature of the Bible is false. Let's look at the Old Testament first briefly. The Pentateuch tells us of the Lord's steadfast love before the giving of the Ten Commandments.

Moses sings this in chapter 15. He says, You, that is God he is dressing, have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed. Notice the steadfast love. You have guided them by your strength to your holy abode.

[3 : 09] David also sings of the Lord's steadfast love. For those who think the Old Testament is all about the God of wrath. A hundred and twenty-seven times in the Psalter, the phrase steadfast love is used, sometimes accompanied with, of the Lord.

And then, of course, there is the Song of Songs. Seldom taught, never preached, but it's about the relationship of a love between a husband and wife that we might also look at like that between God and his people or Christ and his church.

Then, of course, there is the love of God related to us in the prophets, namely that of Hosea. God's love is like that of the prophet to his adulterous wife. And that is only one instant of the kind of love that's shown by God to his people in the prophets.

Often, the people who unite themselves with other gods in a kind of an adulterous relationship. Yes, God's wrath is expressed in the Old Testament, but no more than his love.

And it is often combined with the phrase, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. That's the Old Testament. What about the New Testament? Well, it continues with this attribute of love, but also the anger of God is expressed in the New Testament.

[4 : 27] Jesus expresses his anger often towards those of the self-righteous religious type, especially the leaders. But he does so without contempt or condemnation.

In fact, Jesus believes that he didn't come to condemn because we already stand condemned. That's in John 3, verse 17. Or the Lord doesn't shrink back himself from talking about the consequences of sin, death, and hell.

John, the apostle, who states God is love in another letter, states this in the book of Revelation. Paul, who no doubt is hateful towards followers of Jesus before his conversion, knows the grace and the mercy and the kindness of God.

He gives us the doctrine of justification as it's related to God's wrath. He says this, Since therefore we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved from him, sorry, saved by him, from the wrath of God.

Peter, while he denied Jesus and reconciled to his Lord on the shores of the Sea of Galilee just after the resurrection, later then writes about the holiness of God.

[5 : 59] Holiness which produces God's both anger and love. And so therein lies this other problem with Christianity. That's the title of this sermon series.

This one has to do with wrath. The problem, some outside but also some inside Christianity, is with God's wrath. So this morning I want to do a little CPR.

Not as you know it, but though maybe on our hearts, maybe to bring some of us back to life through this subject of the wrath of God. But the CPR is this. First the concept, second to personalize this, and then thirdly to relate it to others.

I think that we often in apologetics think about relating it to others before we actually personalize it and see how it relates to us. So let's look at this CPR. What is the wrath of God? The concept of this.

Today's text points us in the direction of a description and doctrine of the wrath of God. Isaiah 28 begins a section of the major prophet's judgment, spoken in particular to God's people, Israel, beginning in the 28th chapter.

[7 : 01] But it follows on from this, beginning at the first chapter. First God's word to Judah, then about Emmanuel, then against the nations, and then a word of general judgment, and then we come to this word of judgment against Israel.

Well, that's just a big overview of only 27 chapters. This word of God's wrath is fixed and founded on a particular attribute of God in the book of Isaiah, namely our Lord's holiness.

Isaiah's favorite way of referring to God throughout this is the Holy One. It's quite unique. Isaiah isn't addressing God this way among all the other prophets. It's his favorite way of addressing God.

And the holiness of God then helps us to understand, I think, the wrath of God. It is God's wrath which proceeds from his holiness. And wrath is his resolute action of punishing sin.

Since God is pure and sinless, he cannot dismiss or turn a blind eye to sin and all of its effects. Sin, which is then the rejection of God, and as other writers in the Bible have called it, lawlessness.

[8 : 15] So God in his holiness expresses his wrath towards sin, evil, death, and the devil. There's a lot to say about this from these verses in Isaiah 28.

You may have noticed, though, that the word anger or wrath is not raised in these verses, though that doesn't mean it isn't expressed. The wrath of God comes through quite clearly in verse 22, though in others as well.

So in Isaiah, the prophet takes God, humanity, and sin very seriously when he says this. This is in verse 14, though. Now, therefore, do not scoff, lest your bonds be made strong, for I have heard a decree of destruction.

Sorry, this is verse 22. From the Lord God of hosts against the whole land. This is an expression of God's wrath. The people of God are in dire straits.

So dire is their condition that they are addressed as scoffers and have a covenant with death or shield. Let's look at these two things really quickly.

[9 : 20] Scoffers and a covenant with death. Verse 22 reads, Now, therefore, do not scoff. Verse 14, The prophet addresses Israel the same way as scoffers.

The sin of God's people is so great, they've resorted to scoffing at him. Now, before we think about the people out there that have a problem with the wrath of God, here are the people of God that actually have a problem with him so much that they scoff, which is kind of a mask of anger itself, not written all over their faces, but hidden underneath.

And then there's this covenant with death or shield. The condition of sin is so great that a terrible exchange has occurred. The love of God is expressed towards his people through covenant normally.

Love is spelled C-O-V-E-N-A-N-T in the Old Testament. That's the love of God expressed towards people. But rather than a covenant of love, the people have actually exchanged it, not for life, but for death.

The consequence of this is seer. The result is a decree. The second half of verse 22 then reads this, For I have heard a decree of destruction from, not from somebody else, but from the Lord God of hosts against the whole land.

[10 : 38] Now, that sounds a lot like last week's readings. Well, thank you for paying attention. In verse 13 of chapter 7 of Matthew's gospel, read this way, For the gate is wide and the way is easy.

That leads to destruction. The way of destruction comes by a decree here in Isaiah, not just by kind of following or wandering into this wide space that promises nothing.

Here's the proclamation. Destruction comes not from an accident, but intent. Though not without a really big warning of our Lord. So, the warning comes and is straight from the word of God.

It is against the whole land by way of the Lord's wrath. And this is not a God who flies off in a rage or tweets his reactions. He's not tyrannical, but he is judicial in his slow, deep, and measured anger.

This isn't the Holy One's pleasure, but it surely is his good providence. That's the concept, briefly. Let's personalize this then.

[11 : 48] This is objectionable for many. The objection runs like this by way of questions. Why would a creator inflict wrath and destruction upon that which he created? How can God execute his anger upon those he loves?

Isn't there another way to discipline or judge subjects other than the use of anger? What purpose does it serve for an infinite being to issue a negative consequence of wrath upon finite beings?

How do we form a view of the wrath of God then? Is it possible to hold attention what are not necessarily in competition, both the wrath and the love of God?

As one author wrote about this, without wrath, he, that is God, would cease to be truly holy and his love would degenerate into sentimentality.

Wrath and love of God actually go together. So the wrath of God serves, strengthens, and complements the love of God, and vice versa. The love of God serves and strengthens and complements the wrath of God.

[12 : 56] This makes us a both-and people, not an either-or people. We confess both God's love and his holiness, which includes his wrath. So wrath and love of God are not mutually exclusive because God is holy.

This wrath of God is the revulsion of his character against everything in contradiction to his holiness. Let me say that again. The wrath and love of God are not mutually exclusive because God is holy.

This wrath of God is the revulsion of his character against everything that is in contradiction to his holiness. And what is against or in contradiction to God's holiness?

Sin, evil, the devil. They're all in contradiction to the Lord and his holiness. So then what do you do with this wrath?

Let me turn to some literature here. I know it's getting pretty dense in some ways, but you're tracking. I can tell by the way you're paying attention. In the end, we see God judge sin, evil, the devil, through the cross.

[14 : 08] Does this not through any cross and crucifixion, but through the second person of the Trinity? That is a story, but not one that is made up.

You know, that's the one that Jesus becomes sin for us on the cross. And as I quoted earlier, this is what Paul has to say about that. Since therefore we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved from the wrath of God.

That's the story of salvation. But here's another story in children's fiction. A genre. It's not an original story or unique, but it comes through a book that's called The Whipping Boy by Sid Fleischman.

Some of you maybe had younger children. About the time that this was written in 1986, maybe that wasn't the case, or maybe you were a child around 1986. But the story runs like this.

It's about a prince whose name is Horace. And he's known as Prince Brat. He's always up to no good. He's constantly misbehaving.

[15 : 16] And Prince Brat deserves whippings for his depraved behavior. Royal custom dictates, though, that princes are not to be harmed in any way. So a poor orphan boy by the name of Jeremy or Jeremiah.

Now, he saves and he is substituted for Prince Brat as his whipping boy. Now, even though it doesn't cost Jeremy his life like it does our Lord, you get the idea.

The Son of God is our whipping boy. Or he serves the covenant of death in exchange for our life. That is, Jesus Christ satisfies the wrath of God in our place.

Friends, it would be permissive at best and unjust at worst. Unjust at worst for a holy, good, glorious, sovereign God to turn a blind eye to sin, evil, and the devil.

God gives us a choice in the matter. Of accepting the penalty due us of the Holy One's wrath through Jesus' death on the cross and eternal life or through our own death and separation from God for eternity.

[16 : 28] And therein lies the problem with the wrath of God for people. The problem of heaven or hell. The implication and satisfaction of God's wrath in the end is either eternity without or with God.

That is, Jesus. Jesus. This is not just academic. It is real. It's practical. It's eternal. Four weeks ago, I was due for my dental hygiene appointment to make things trite here, but to relate them to the matter at hand.

I really like my hygienist. But it's really unfair, you must admit. The appointments end up being like monologues if there's a conversation with comments and questions while hands and mouth for 45 minutes.

Never mind, foot and mouth. The last time we made it through, of all things, I kid you not, parenting, the LGBTQ, divorce, a university, heaven and hell.

The whole range. On the final subject, my hygienist wanted to know what I thought, as was the case in every situation. And I said, it comes down to one thing, and that is what you think of Jesus.

[17 : 47] She's Jewish. And she said, yeah, it always comes back to Jesus. I said, yeah, you're right. This is about relating it, not just personalizing it now once we have done that.

But relating it to others. How do we do this in CPR? So how do we relate to this? Well, you see, Jesus is the one spoken of in Isaiah 28, verse 16. If you look down with me and we read that, it says these words, Behold, I am the one who has laid a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation.

Whoever believes will not be in haste. Jesus is this stone who calls forth belief and faith. Our Lord claims this in all four Gospels, and Peter in Acts in chapter 4, that Jesus is this cornerstone.

He is the one, the sure foundation laid by God for Israel, the church, and each and every one of us. It is our Lord's justice in verse 17 that his wrath fully addresses as it reads, Then your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand.

When the overwhelming scourge passes through, you will be beaten down by it. God makes this great promise. He annuls the penalty and the power of death.

[19 : 10] This legal term, annul, is used to describe the effect of God's wrath by His holiness and through grace to end, to terminate, to dissolve sin, death, and the devil.

It will be no more. This is good news for us to declare. By the grace and the holiness of God, our Lord is slow to anger and steadfast in love.

I want to read to you a statement by Murislaw Volf, who is a Croatian Christian who now teaches at Yale, who struggled with reconciling the wrath and the love of God.

But this is what he said, I used to think that, this is a longish quote, that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn't God's 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.

[20 : 22] According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3 million 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. 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 of his love. Friends, how do we relate this to a world that has a hard time with God's wrath?

And I think there are ways in which we can show them just the goodness, the holiness, the love of God's wrath. But we need to do that with humility. With utter humility.

[21 : 38] And be honest about the struggles that we have with it, but also know our poverty of spirit and that we seriously lack something because of sin and evil. And that Jesus is the one who addresses our greatest need, which is our separation from God.

And he does that by his own death and receiving that wrath where we should have, but he did in our place. So we do so with humility. But we also do so not only with humility, but with inquiry as we come alongside of people and ask questions.

Like we want to be asked at times. And ask questions about how one deals with the evil in our world externally in some ways.

But also the sin in our own personal life. What can really address that need? And as I had this conversation with my hygienist, she was convinced about a number of things about God and her own security.

And I just asked, how can you be so sure? How can you be so sure? And she had to admit that she couldn't be. But I think that we can because of who Jesus is and what it is that he did for us that we could not do for ourselves and expresses God's great holiness and his love to us.

[23 : 04] by not withholding his wrath, his indignation, his action upon that which is in great contradiction to him. So this we bear in mind, but also take to heart as we have hope in the Lord, in him alone.

I speak to you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.