

The Wrath Problem (Evening Service)

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- [0 : 0 0] Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening? In Christ's name, amen. Yes, please, grab a seat. Thank you, Bree. Well, good evening, everybody.
- It is so nice to see you all. My name is Aaron, and I'm the minister for the service here. If you haven't met me, I'd love to meet you. Just come and say hi at the end of the service. So you have caught us, if you're new.
- So in week two of a series called The Problem with Christianity, and each week we're going to look at a difficult issue. We're going to look at an accusation that someone might level at the Christian faith.
- For example, an accusation like this. Christianity is arrogant because it claims a monopoly on truth, or Christians are sexually repressive, as a couple of examples. So each week, a different topic.
- And the purpose is twofold. One, it's hopefully to help you answer objections that people might have about the Christian faith. And two, it will help answer questions that you might have about the faith.
- [1 : 0 8] Perhaps these are things you struggle with personally. So anyway, this week, the issue we're dealing with is wrath or wrath. How do we say it in our country?
- Wrath? Wrath? Wrath? Wrath sounds much better, actually, doesn't it? Wrath. The Bible teaches us that God judges and that hell is a real place.
- And these are very distressing concepts, aren't they? Very distressing. How can this God who we see in Christ is so loving and gentle and stuff, how can that be also the God that judges difficult issues?
- So what we're going to do is we're going to look at Isaiah 28, and we're going to unpack it. And I think it will be a help to us in understanding this idea that God can be a God of anger.
- Right, so the passage starts by talking about some scoffers. So some scoffers are talking. Therefore, hear the word of the Lord, verse 14, you scoffers who rule this people in Jerusalem.
- [2 : 2 3] So what's that about? In wisdom literature in the Bible, particularly in Proverbs, and I'm not saying this well, but there's basically three levels of stupidity in Proverbs.
- So level one is the Bible describes as the simple. So this is the naive person. They're easily manipulated. They haven't completely messed up their life. They're teachable.
- They're teachable, right? So that's the simple. Level two is the fool. And the fool is reveling in their foolishness. They're doing stupid things, and they're inviting other people into their stupid life, and they're enjoying themselves.
- Level three. So we have the simple, the fool, and the top level of stupidity is the scoffer, or sometimes translated, the mocker. And these folks are the highest level.
- And these are people who think they have life so figured out that they mock you. Their posture towards God is one of cynicism and or arrogance.

[3 : 27] Lots of scoffers around. They would be folks who, if you talked about your faith to them in their minds, their thinking, or perhaps even saying it loud, perhaps they'd say things like this.

What pre-scientific nonsense. Why don't you leave all that rubbishy superstition behind and enter the age of reason?

You are embarrassing yourself. There is no God, certainly not an angry one who will judge you. That's the kind of thing a scoffer would say, or at least think. So these scoffers, that's how Proverbs describe them.

Now these scoffers in our passage today, verse 15, here is them being quoted. We have made a covenant with death and with Sheol. We've made an agreement. When the overwhelming whip passes through, it will not come to us.

Now I don't think these are the words verbatim of these scoffers. I think Isaiah is giving this kind of scathing satire of what they're saying. And a bit of background here is probably helpful. So Isaiah is talking about the leaders of Jerusalem.

[4 : 34] And the leaders of Jerusalem, what they have done is, so there are countries, sort of enemy countries, and they've made all these deals with these neighboring countries.

Countries that actually hated Israel, hated Israel's God. But Israel's making these deals with them to protect themselves instead of trusting the Lord to protect them, which God had done on countless times.

Now the thing is, you might think, well, it's quite a good idea, make deals with people around you. That seems smart. The problem is this, is God didn't want them to do that because when Israel did that, when they made all these pacts and deals with enemy nations around them, they always imported the gods, the foreign gods.

It was always a disaster. So Isaiah says, basically what you're saying, leaders of Jerusalem, is this. You've made a pact with death by doing this. And what's worse is the leadership knows what they're doing is wrong, but they think to themselves, God won't judge us.

It's going to be fine. We can do whatever we want. It doesn't really matter. That's what verse 15 means. When the overwhelming whip passes through, it will not come to us. So the Israelites trusted in their allegiances rather than God and didn't think God would have a problem with it.

[5 : 51] Now, what's in store for these scoffers? How is this going to pan out for them? That's verses 17 to 20. They remind you of what it says.

And it's not fun reading. Now I'll make justice the line and righteousness the plumb line, and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies. The waters will overwhelm the shelter.

Then your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand. When the overwhelming scourge passes through, you'll be beaten down. And as often as it passes through, it will take you.

From morning by morning, it will pass through. By day and by night, it will be sheer terror. The bed is too short. The covering too narrow to wrap oneself in.

So terrible verses. This is the end of the scoffers. What's going on here? What does this mean? It starts by talking about a plumb line. It's a masonry image. You know a plumb line, a piece of string, big heavy weight on the bottom.

[6 : 49] And when it's still, when it's held up and it's still, because of gravity, that's a perfectly straight line. So what God starts off by saying is that He will judge in perfect straightness, with perfect justice, with a perfect understanding.

And that judgment, when it comes, it will look like a storm. And the storm it describes wipes out everything. Everything will be destroyed, all these agreements and covenants, all these things you trusted are going to be gone.

The storm, it says, is unavoidable. It's never ending. Morning by morning, day and night. By about January in Vancouver, I start to get a bit depressed by the grey.

You know Vancouver. It's like if you've just joined us, you come in a region or something, welcome to Vancouver. It's fantastic. But there's about eight months of grey. And what gets me through, because I think I get a bit of seasonal affective disorder or something, is I just tell myself, okay, it's grey and it's horrible and it's cold and it's windy, but sort of March, March is coming.

April's coming, man. April is coming. And the crocuses will come up and the flowers will start budding. I can get through this. I count down the months. There's hope, right? There's hope. The darkest part of Vancouver winter, there is hope.

[8 : 05] This is not the case with God's final judgment. There is no hope. There's no end in sight. Verse 20, For the bed is too short to stretch oneself on, the covering too narrow to wrap ones, it's this sort of awful picture of somebody lying, like an adult lying on a children's bed and they just cannot, they can't find a place to lie down which is comfortable and they've got this tiny wee little blanket, like a face, and they're trying to cover themselves.

There's no comfort. There's no hope. Verse 21, In case we begin to think that God enjoys talking about this, enjoys the judgment, we have verse 21.

In case we begin to think that this is what God is all about, just this big, angry, super being, there is verse 21.

Listen how Isaiah describes the judgment of God. For the Lord will rise up as on Mount Perizim. As I actually waited for Claire to say this first before I worked out how I was going to say it.

Thank you. So that's how we're going to say it. Perizim, as in the valley of Gibeon, he will be roused. God will rise up in anger. So they're describing a couple of battles that the Israelites won, right?

[9 : 30] And then listen to how it describes God's judgment here. God will do his deed. Strange is his deed. Describes his judgment as strange.

To do his work. Alien is his work. It describes God's judgment as a strange work, as an alien work. It's saying that this judgment, this is foreign to God's deepest desires.

He doesn't delight in it. Judgment is not the central disposition of God's heart. God doesn't gladly judge, but he does do it. God's proper work.

That's not the right way to say it. God's proper work. The thing that's more sort of central to who God is, the thing that God does that best describes his nature, is to give life, to extend grace and mercy and to love us.

You might say, well, where do we see this in the passage? Well, it's verse 14 primarily. Behold, I'm the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion a stone, a tested stone.

[10 : 38] A tested stone is a really, really, really, really and if you wanted to crack open another stone, you'd take this stone and you'd throw it down on this stone and the other one would break because this stone is so amazing.

A stone, a tested stone, a precious stone, a sure foundation. Whoever believes in him will not be in haste. So, how do we talk about this?

In haste, what does that mean? That's a helpful way to talk about it. In haste. It means that in the moment of God's anger and judgment, there will be some people who aren't in haste.

In other words, there will be some people who aren't running around looking for a place to hide. They'll be safe. And why will they be safe? Because God has laid a foundation, a precious foundation, a true foundation, an immovable foundation.

And 1 Peter 2, Peter, the disciple of Peter, describes this foundation as he quotes this line and he says, this is Christ. Isaiah 28 is talking about Christ.

[11 : 48] Christ is that foundation. If you trust in Christ, you're saved from the judgment. You're saved from God's anger. You don't have to live with shame. I know some of you guys live with shame.

You've been carrying it for years. You don't have to because of this foundation. Some of you fear the anger of God.

You don't have to because of this foundation. This foundation is sure and precedent. It won't disappoint. You can bank on this stuff.

You can bank your future on Jesus. And God's desire is for you to know this foundation in your life, which is why he warns us about this judgment. But this whole thing, this whole thing we're talking about, it's not like God's going, let me tell you something really cool.

I can do really cool stuff. I can do pretty amazing things. I can do powerful things. Let me tell you about a couple of them. Let's talk about judgment now. No, he's only saying this because he wants us not to experience it.

[12 : 54] So right at the start, it says, you scoffers. Here's what's going to happen to you. And then halfway through, verse 22, it says, do not scoff. It's a warning.

Verse 23, give ear. Hear my voice. Give attention. Hear my speech. Like four different ways of saying, listen to me. God wants you to know Christ.

And he wants us to know that if we reject him, the storm will come and there is no safe place. Now that's the passage explained and I wonder what you think about all of that.

How does that sit with you? Does the idea of a God who gets angry and judges, is that a tough one for you to wrap your head around? Would you have trouble explaining it to others?

Just for the last sort of quarter of a sermon, I just want to throw a few ideas out which I think might be helpful. If I was trying to make an apologetic, if I was trying to make a defense for this aspect of God's character, trying to help somebody understand it, I would probably say a few of the following things.

[14 : 13] I would say this. I would say that love and anger can exist together and that's okay. They can exist together in God and that's good.

I would also say this, that God is angry because He loves. In fact, there is a correlation between how much God loves and His judgment.

I mean, don't we get angry? I mean, we get angry. Don't we get angry when someone we love is ruining their life? We know people that are living this incredibly self-destructive kind of life.

Don't we get angry? Don't we, you know, if we really love them, we wouldn't be scared to judge them, would we? We wouldn't be scared to judge their behavior and talk to them about it, call them out. God loves His world.

God hates injustice. He hates greed. He hates self-centeredness. He hates it because it hurts the world He loves and because He loves it, He's going to judge it and He's going to end it and He's going to close it down.

[15 : 17] I mean, would you really want to follow a God who didn't seem to care about these things? So when God, when somebody says to you, I can't be a Christian, I can't believe what you believe, I believe in God but I can't, I can't buy into your stuff because God is love.

You can say yes. That's what the Bible teaches. That doesn't mean that God loves everything though. It doesn't mean God loves racism.

It doesn't mean God loves corporate greed. He hates it and He wants to end it and He'll judge it. And now someone in response might say this, they might say, yes, okay, but this idea of an angry God, won't this just empower Christians to do awful things?

If you believe in a judging God, won't this lead Christians to do violent things? and yes, it has. It has done that and we need to own that.

Christians have done terrible things believing themselves to be God's tool in punishing people and that's not good.

[16 : 32] The thing is though, knowing God is a judge and knowing God gets angry about sin, that shouldn't lead us to be violent people.

It actually should lead us in the opposite direction. Actually, knowing God will judge should make us peacemakers. That's the logical way it should lead us. Let me explain this. Miroslav Volf is helpful here.

He's a theologian. I think he's at Yale. He grew up in communist Yugoslavia. His father was tortured in a concentration camp. He himself was interrogated many times, persecuted.

This is all in the Balkans. I say that just to show that I'm about to quote him. He's not some sort of ivory tower completely out of touch theologian.

He says this. He says, the only way we can be people who practice non-violence, the only way we can be people who are peacemakers is by believing that God will make all things right. That he will judge.

[17 : 33] Which means that if we know that God will judge, we really believe that we are far less likely to take the law into our own hands to seek revenge because we know that God will settle all accounts.

Let me quote from him. It's kind of a dense quote. So just follow me here. This is Volf. My thesis is that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance.

Isn't that interesting? I'll say it again. My thesis is that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance. My thesis will be unpopular in the West. But imagine speaking to people as I have whose cities and villages have been plundered, burnt, leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit.

Your point to them, you should not retaliate. Why not? I say the only means of prohibiting violence is to insist that violence is only legitimate when it comes from God.

If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make an final end of violence, that God should not be worthy of our worship. So he's saying we can put down our swords. We can be people who seek peace, not vengeance, because we know that God will settle all accounts.

[18 : 51] That's basically what he's saying. I might have told you this story before, but in 2006, a guy walks into an Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania and shoots 10 schoolgirls. Five of them died.

Five of them had significant injuries and the gunman killed himself. In these situations, what does the media do? They always focus on a couple of things. One, the gunner, the guns that they have, where do they get the guns?

How do they get the guns? Do they fall through the cracks, et cetera? The other thing they focus on is the guy's social media feed and what was he reading and what was he thinking about and who was he connected to?

Those are the two big things. In this case, that sort of whole side of the story was eclipsed by the incredible response of the Amish people.

After the shooting, a representative of the community, a guy called Jack Meyer, he said this, I don't think there's anyone here that wants to do anything but forgive and not only reach out to those who have suffered a loss but to reach out to the family of the man who committed these acts.

[19 : 52] So the Amish community forgave this man and not only that, they took up offerings for the family of the killer because he was the breadwinner. I listened to an interview with the mother of the shooter a while ago.

The mother is actually now a caregiver for one of the girls who is profoundly disabled as a result of the shooting. But she said this in the interview and this is NPR if you want to look it up.

She talked about how the week of the shooting they had a, the son died. They had a tiny little private funeral for the son and then they went to the gravesite and she says this, when we went to the gravesite we saw as many as 40 Amish start coming out from around the side of the graveyard surrounding them like a crescent.

And her quote now, love just emanated from them she said. So as I said the newspapers and reporters and the TV shows they talked about the amazing attitude of the Amish people.

That was the big story. They even made a movie about it but the forgiveness was so radical that the movie couldn't handle it.

[21 : 05] So they had to change the movie they had to mute this idea of radical forgiveness. So what they did is they invented this character called Ida who was filled with rage and wanted revenge and stuff because the radical forgiveness was just too much to believe in.

You know in the newspapers they'd talk about they would say things like the Amish people represented the best of us etc. Ignoring the whole Christian aspect of it. The Amish people could forgive.

Why? Why could they forgive? Why weren't they just completely encompassed in seeking revenge or you know they could forgive because they believed in a Christ who forgave his own tormentors.

They could forgive because at its heart what is forgiveness? Forgiveness is saying I give up my right to pay back. Forgiveness is saying I give up my right to pay back.

And we can only do that when we believe in a God who will ultimately bring about justice and judge with total fairness.

[22 : 12] It's the only way we can arrive at that position. So in summary two sentences God judges because he loves and we can love because we know God will judge.

now the passage we unpacked earlier was not primarily an apologetic for the divine right of God to judge.

So I'll finish on what the passage is about. The passage is a warning and it's an encouragement. it's a warning to scoffers and I think this is helpful for us because just I think in our age in our city it is easy for this kind of quiet cynicism towards God to rise up in our hearts and the passage is saying be aware and be warned about that.

Be aware of that. But it's also an encouragement if you're a believer continue to trust in Jesus.

This is the only foundation you've got that is going to bear the storm. Amen.