

Gospel is the old English word for *good news*. So, every Sunday, the third Bible reading is called the *Gospel Lesson*. It is always a portion from the Bible books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John – the four accounts of Jesus’ life, also known as the *Gospels*, the good news of our Savior Jesus.

It has been a tradition in Christian churches for well over 500 years for the pastor to end the Gospel lesson by proclaiming something along the lines of, “This is the Gospel of our Lord,” to which the congregation responds by saying or singing something along the lines of, “Praise be to you, Christ!” – a response of gratitude from hearts that just heard the *good news*.

There are some Sundays where this wonderful Christian tradition feels a little off. Have you ever felt that?

For me it happens when I proclaim, “This is the gospel (good news) of our Lord” immediately after Jesus says something not so *good* feeling.

Take, for instance, the *gospel* you heard just a minute ago. Jesus tells the parable of the minas and ends by saying: **“Those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them – bring them here and kill them in front of me.”**

This is the good news of our angry King! Praise be to you, for the public execution of those who did not want you to be king!

Good news – Wrath-filled King. To many American ears, one of these things is not like the other.

I’ve been a pastor long enough to know that one of the great struggles that Americans have with Christianity and the Bible is the wrath of God.

Maybe it is the classic skeptical challenge: how can a loving God send people to an eternal hell?

But it’s not just skeptics out in the world that cringe at the wrath of God. I have run into many life-long Christians who wrestle to square the loving Jesus they learned about in Christian day school and the God they run across on certain pages of the Bible.

Example A: Our sermon text for today (that Bible reading from Ezekiel 9). The Jesus-loves-me-this-I-know-for-the-Bible-tells-me-so God gives the order in that same Bible, **“Kill, without showing pity or compassion. Slaughter the old men, the young men and women, the mothers and children... defile the temple and fill the courts with the slain.”**

Take up the challenge of reading the entire Bible and you will find that this is far from an isolated incident where God loses his cool. And neither is this just the angry God of the Old Testament while the New Testament God is much less wrath-filled. You heard Jesus just a minute ago: **“bring them here and kill them in front of me.”**

So, what are we to make of the wrath of God? How are we supposed to explain this to our skeptical neighbors? How are we supposed to understand this ourselves?

These are very important questions to grapple with. In case you missed it at the beginning of the service, today is Last Judgment Sunday – one Sunday a year where we specifically remember that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. Implicit in that is the truth that one day Jesus will unleash his wrath for all eternity on those who stand against him. This makes today a good day to grapple with God’s wrath.

God through Ezekiel is going to give us some things to think about today.

In order to better understand the wrath of God in Ezekiel 9, can I tell you what happened in Ezekiel 8?

Ezekiel was a priest serving in Judah. But in 597 BC, when he was 25 years old, Babylon conquered Jerusalem and Ezekiel was forcibly deported with about 10,000 other upper class Jews (like King Jehoiachin, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – Ezekiel was in the same group carted off to Babylon). Ezekiel and his wife settled near the Kebar River about 50 miles south of the ancient city of Babylon in modern day Iraq.

5 years later he is sitting in his house with some fellow Jewish exiles and he says **“the hand of the Sovereign LORD came on him.”** Like Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, God grabs Ezekiel by the hair and flies him back to the city of Jerusalem to see what is happening back home and to give him a prediction of future events. What he sees is horrible.

God had allowed Babylon to defeat Judah in the hope that people who were straying from him would be forced to admit that they needed him – so they would come to their senses (like the Prodigal Son wishing he could eat pig slop). But unlike the Prodigal Son, most of the Jews didn’t get the message. Instead, they upped the ante and started spitting in God’s face.

Ezekiel sees the people of Jerusalem engaging in unthinkable acts of Idolatry. He sees the Elders of Jerusalem worshiping painted pictures scribbled on the very walls of the temple courts. He sees the women of Jerusalem worshiping a pagan god of fertility at the very gates to God’s temple (I’ll let your imagination fill in what worshiping a pagan god of fertility might entail). He sees people in the very heart of God’s temple bowing down with their backs to the true God as they worship the rising sun.

After his whirlwind tour God asks Ezekiel, **“Have you seen this, son of man? Is it a trivial matter for the house of Judah to do the detestable things they are doing here? Must they also fill the land with violence and continually provoke me to anger?”** – because you see, not only were they committing idolatry, in the power vacuum created by Babylon’s conquest and deportation of their leaders many Jews were giving into the worst human impulses. The cats were away so the mice came out to play, but in their play the people of Jerusalem were hurting each other in horrible ways.

And then comes the loud voice. Then comes the guards with their deadly weapons and the command to kill. But did you catch what happened before the command to kill?

Six men come with deadly weapons, with them is a man clothed in linen who has a writing kit at his side. “The LORD called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side and said to him “Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it.” And then in his command to kill the LORD makes clear, “Do not touch anyone who has the mark.”

You see, there were some in Jerusalem who were the victims. As always happens when people give in to their worst impulses, there were victims of their selfishness and violence and idolatry. And in this vision of future judgement that God gave Ezekiel, the grieving victims would be spared. For those victims that violent day, Judgement day, would be the end of their suffering.

And this brings us face to face with a very important truth when it comes to the wrath of our God. In a world ruined by sin, populated with sinners, the love of God requires a reckoning. The love of God requires wrath-filled justice.

Think through this with me.

Imagine you are a father. You have a beautiful wife and daughter. One day a very selfish and evil man kills your wife and does to your daughter the very worst things a father can imagine.

Now if you, as a Father whose family has been so mistreated by the worst impulses of men, respond with indifference (“Oh, well. Too bad. I’ll get another wife and we’ll have more kids”). – if you responded with indifference can you say you loved your wife and daughter? Does not love in that case *require* anger – justified wrath?

That is just the smallest taste of how God feels after the Garden of Eden. The worst impulses of humanity have taken God’s children, and hurt them in ways we can barely begin to fathom or imagine, and yet we experience them on some level on a daily basis. And the love of God requires anger at all the pain and violence that happen in his world because of human selfishness.

If God responded with indifference to those victims in Jerusalem, if God responded with indifference today, then he wouldn’t be a loving God. But he does love. He loves hard. Which means he gets angry when he sees people hurting each other. When he sees people hurting each other he gets angry *because* he loves – in fact you might say the greater his anger, the more he must love his children. And he promises judgment *because* he loves – a day when victims will be saved and justice will finally be realized.

The love of God cannot exist without the wrath of God. If he actually loves people then he is going to be mad when he sees the pain that human selfishness inflicts.

That is an important truth. It’s a good truth to have in your back pocket when you run into the skeptic. That’s a good truth to keep in mind as you read the Bible – if you see God get really angry it is because someone is hurting God’s children, and he will not stand by and let that happen.

That is an important truth, but we would be doing ourselves a disservice if we kept it a theoretical truth.

**Not only does God’s love help me understand his wrath.**

**I also believe that God’s wrath helps me better understand his love.**

Here’s what I mean: This God, this Ezekiel 9 God is your God.

If he gave Ezekiel the lifted by the hair tour of your life what might he see and what might your God feel based on what he sees?

If he took Ezekiel to the places where you do life: your kitchen (where you interact with your family), your work place (whether it’s a school or a business, the place where you interact with your neighbors), your grocery store, your fitness center, your car as you commute between all of the above – if he gave Ezekiel this lifted by the hair tour of your life what would he see?

Specifically, if Ezekiel knew your thoughts, heard your words, and saw your actions as you interact with the world around you what would he know, hear, and see, and how might God feel based on what he sees? Would he see selfish thoughts, words, and actions – selfishness that always has victims, remember, someone always suffers when you act selfishly?

And if God does indeed love those people (the victims of your selfishness), how do you think God should feel?

Might God be prompted to ask Ezekiel, “Is it a trivial thing to do the detestably selfish things they are doing here? Must they continually provoke me to anger?”

And yet, you and I did not come here today expecting God’s wrath. We came here today expecting his love.

And you’ve heard his love – his forgiveness given to you through his pastor.

You’ve sung of his love – we just sang a hymn looking forward to Judgement Day with excitement.

You came here today expecting God’s love not wrath, and his love you have, and you know why.

Because his wrath has found an object other than you. There was another man who was dragged before a king and then killed. There was another who was killed without pity or compassion, whose blood was spilled in the streets of Jerusalem. There was another who hung on a cross and cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” experiencing the full wrath that God feels.

It is because of Jesus that you came here today expecting love instead of wrath. And I believe that love becomes even more breathtaking when we remember his wrath – what might have been; what should have been. The God who should have had me dragged before him to die, instead invites me into a gospel bear hug of mercy and forgiveness.

Listen. Do you hear it? In that running water of the baptismal font is the reminder of our God who took out his writing kit and with bloody ink he placed his mark on our heads and hearts – his wrath and judgement pass us by, not because we are innocent but because the innocent One took that wrath and judgement for us.

We came here expecting God's love. And his love we have.

Friends, **God's love helps me understand his wrath.** In every angry outburst of God is the promise that he will not leave me in a sin wrecked world forever. He will come and he will bring justice because he loves me.

**God's wrath also helps me understand his love.** In every angry outburst is the reminder of the wrath that I should feel but I never will because of his breathtaking love that does not treat me as my sins deserve.

Praise the LORD for his loving wrath. Amen.