

HOSEA NO. 3
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Hosea's Angry God

After a three-week hiatus, a brief review. The great theme of the preaching of Hosea the prophet is that, because Israel has forsaken God's covenant with her, she is soon to be punished. Fully two-thirds of the book is devoted to Hosea's presentation of the evidence—in the manner of a prosecuting attorney—that Israel had in fact broken faith with God. Another quarter of the book is given to enumerating and describing the various curses which are about to befall Israel; the very curses God promised to visit upon his people should they betray the covenant, when first he made the covenant with Israel in the days of Moses. Indeed, Leviticus 26, and Deuteronomy 28 are the most important background chapters for Hosea; for they contain the listing of curses God promises to visit upon Israel should she fail to live up to her covenant obligations; and these same curses appear in Hosea's prophecy.

This morning, I want to deal with the general theme of God's punishment of Israel for her sin; of his wrath and anger; a theme which, of course, recurs repeatedly throughout the book and is not confined to a single statement or a single chapter. Some of you are familiar with Tony Campolo, a Christian sociologist who is a very popular speaker, particularly adept at motivating Christian young people to a life of discipleship. In a recent edition of WORLD VISION magazine, there is an article by Campolo entitled, "Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up." It is vintage Tony Campolo: bright, funny, and straight-from-the-hip. I love the first paragraph:

It was one o'clock in the morning when I boarded the red-eye flight from California to Philadelphia. I was looking forward to getting some rest but the guy next to me wanted to talk.

"What's your name?" he asked. I said, "Tony Campolo." And then he asked, "What do you do?"

Now when I want to talk, I say I'm a sociologist. And they say, 'Oh, that's interesting.' But if I really want to shut someone up, I say I'm a Baptist evangelist. Generally that does it.

"I'm a Baptist evangelist," I said.

But, as fun as Campolo is to listen to or to read; and as good as he often is, sometimes he lets his enthusiasm to make a point run away with him—a weakness, of course, common to us all. In this article, in attempting to convince young people that nothing short of a radical discipleship is enough for Christians, he offers this reminiscence:

When I became a Christian, the Korean War was in progress. I didn't know whether to accept the draft or not. I talked to a colonel about my feelings. "My problem," I said, "is that I want to do what Jesus would do." He said, "Could you get in a plane, fly over an enemy village and drop bombs?" I said, "I could get in the plane. I could fly over the enemy village. But when I was about to release the bombs, at that moment I would have to say, 'Jesus, if you were in my place, would you drop the bombs?'" "

I remember the colonel yelling back to me, "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. Everybody knows that Jesus wouldn't drop bombs!" And that colonel probably knew more about Jesus than a lot of Christians I know.

REALLY? What makes one think that Christ would not do such a thing or approve of his followers doing it? What about the Lord Christ makes us think that he would not kill and destroy in such a way?

Do we not, in fact, encounter in the Gospels and in the rest of the Bible, a King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who stands quite ready to, indeed, who promises without fail to judge and to destroy all those who will not surrender their wills to his? Indeed, does not this same Jesus Christ command the officers of every government to punish criminals, even to execute the worst of them, on *his* behalf; and does he not explicitly call that judgment meted out through human government his own judgment?

No, it is surely a striking way to make a point, but Mr Campolo has in this joined himself to a tendency that has become very widespread. The doctrine of the wrath and the judgment of the Lord, of his holy anger and of his vengeance upon sin and unbelief, has been largely eclipsed in our day. You hardly ever hear of such a thing from the popular preachers of the radio and the television; or even from the pulpits of thoroughly evangelical and Bible-believing churches. It is not in fashion; it is not popular; it is even widely thought to be vulgar and inappropriate for a minister to enter largely into

such subjects today, however much those same subjects may dominate large sections of God's own Holy Word.

Why? What is to account for the loss of what is incontestably a biblical truth: that God is angry with the wicked every day; and that they will by no means escape his righteous judgment, fierce, hot, and final as it is?

Well, no doubt the causes are many.

1. First, our living in a world which so tolerates so much sinning, and such gross sinning, has had the effect of dulling even sensitive Christian hearts to the true measure, horror, and disgusting character of sin. You may have heard Alexander Pope's famous verse:

Vice is a monster of so frightful a mien,
That to be trusted needs but to be seen.
Yet, seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.

And so it has been in our society and, alas, even in the church of God. We have become so used to sin, that we cannot any longer see it for what it is, as the abominable thing which God hates! And as soon as sin becomes a light thing in our minds, the very idea of divine wrath and judgment must give way, for no one can believe in a God who flies into great rage over nothing.

2. Second, in our day of official unbelief and of the worship of man, there is scarcely a doctrine more unfashionable, more unwelcome, more likely to suffer ridicule than the doctrine of God's wrath against sinners. Modern man will hear nothing of it and scorns the very idea as primitive and juvenile. And so we, fearful of the opinion of man as we so often are, say nothing because we would be ashamed or embarrassed by this truth. Why we should be is, of course, another question. If our age has taught us anything of human nature, it has taught us that all mankind is constitutionally inclined to disbelieve what is unwelcome; that even very clever people will refuse to believe what they do not want to be true, however strong the evidence may be.

In reading Richard Rhoades's excellent history of 20th century physics, The Making of the Atomic Bomb, I have been struck by how many

brilliant Jewish physicists and chemists nearly lost their lives, because they could not bring themselves to believe that the Nazi government of Adolph Hitler would really do what it threatened to do. Or, how about a more recent example from our just-completed election. Was not this campaign a perfect illustration of the difficulty of facing the truth—either by candidates or electorates, if the truth is not popular and does not serve to advance our sense of well-being? Indeed, it is a political doctrine in our land, that what the people cannot accept, must not be true, and therefore must be denied and scorned as loudly as possible. Well, so it is with the doctrine of divine wrath.

3. Then, in the third place, we have lost our grip upon the wrath of God as a large part of the truth about God, because it is a truth which is so naturally averse to our own flesh—even we who are Christians—that unless we work very hard to hold fast to it, it will not remain in our minds. It is a truth which never has and never will successfully coexist in hearts that are lazy, spiritually dull, enamored of this world, full of pride and self-conceit—and because our minds and hearts are so often and so much like that, it is no wonder that the wrath of judgment of God and his judgment does not lodge there as it should.

Now the results of this loss of the truth, or at least of the loss of its active presence in the mind and heart of the Church and of Christians in general is everywhere to be seen.

1. We see it in a perversely skewed picture of God which is seriously accepted as genuine by a great many Christian ministers and people alike. A God who is all kindness and no hatred; a God who is all light and no consuming fire, a God, in short, who exists for our pleasure, and is not to be feared.
2. We see it, further, in a trivialization of Christian thought and ministry, by which things of little importance have wholly displaced things of massive and all-consuming importance. The church clearly seems to be more interested today in whether a person is finding self-fulfillment or has a healthy self-image, than whether he or she will fall forever under the punishing and unrelenting judgments of the Almighty. We seem to be in the Church too much today as the driver of a car who

worries about his passenger spilling coffee as the car plunges through a guardrail and hurtles over the edge of a high cliff toward the rocks below. We are preparing a race of people who will, like the character in Robert Louis Stevenson's story, be nursing a toothache on the judgement day. And, for all the attention that the Christian church pays, the Lord Christ might just as well never have said that we should gouge out any right eye that causes us to sin or cut off any right arm, for it is better to enter heaven maimed than to be cast whole into hell.

Surely, it cannot be insignificant that among the literally hundreds of books on marriage, the family, psychological health and happiness, managing your money, etc., you can find today in Christian bookstores, I have not found a single first-class work on the doctrine of hell and of divine judgment written in this century. The only really important study of that theme that I know of written in our time, is in Dutch and it was written more than sixty years ago.

Well, all of this is the incontestable proof that the prophets of the Old Testament are exceedingly important for the church today; that their message has perhaps never been so necessary, so crucial to the church as in our own day.

1. For the prophets, of which Hosea is completely typical, devote an immense amount of their preaching to what we have neglected almost altogether: the judgment and the wrath of God.
2. The centerpiece of their preaching is just this divine wrath against sin and the impending doom of those who betray his covenant and who do not believe his Word.

Indeed, is it not the case that one large reason Christian folk often give the prophets short shrift in their reading of the Bible is precisely because we do not enjoy nor think ourselves to profit from reading chapter after chapter describing how the unbelievers and the disobedient will eventually fall under God's righteous judgment and how they will get it in the neck—often in vivid detail and living color.

Well, this divine wrath and its description certainly loom large in Hosea's preaching. We have read of the punishment which God intends to visit

upon Israel in this morning's text—of God making Israel like a desert, of his blocking her path with thorn bushes, of his stripping her naked and slaying her with thirst; of his ruining her vines and fig trees. But this is just the beginning.

He will cut her in pieces (6:5)

Woe to them (7:13)

He will send them back to Egypt. . . that is, make them captives again (8:13)

God will remember their wickedness and punish them for their sins (9:9)

Even if they rear children, I will bereave them of everyone. Ephraim will bring out their children to the slayer. Give them wombs that miscarry and breasts that are dry. (9:12-14) God will reject them, they will be wanderers among the nations. (9:17)

And, of course, the actual punishment was still worse when the Assyrians conquered Israel—murdering, pillaging, raping as they came; and then took the Israelites away, scattering them among the various parts of their huge empire as slave labor was required—never to be heard from again. Hosea did not mince his words; he held nothing back; he predicted precisely what occurred:

“The people of Samaria must bear their guilt,” he cried, “because they have rebelled against their God. They will fall by the sword; their little ones will be dashed to the ground; their pregnant women ripped open.” (13:17)

It is repugnant to think of it. But this is our God speaking; the Lord Jesus Christ himself. And this wrath is, of course, only a foretaste of the wrath he visits on the unbeliever in the world to come!

Like the other great prophets, Hosea makes no apologies for the fact, or the ferocity, or the intractability of divine wrath. It is the just desert of those who rebel against God and spurn his kindness and mercy and who make a life of selfish and sensual pursuits.

Now the Lord obviously wants us to know these things; to believe them and to attend to them in our thinking and our living. They are part of that sound doctrine, that is, that life-giving, healthy doctrine of which the Scripture is full. The prophets of the Old Testament had to contend in their day, just as we must in ours, with many whose message was all sweetness and light. Micah in his prophecy says: “If a liar and a deceiver comes and says, ‘I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,’ he would be just the prophet for this people.” (2:11) Today this prophet would have a TV program and it would be popular! But the end of that kind of thinking and preaching, which denies the wrath of God, is not happiness and salvation, but judgment and destruction. So say Micah and all of the prophets!

Let me then briefly mention several ways in which facing squarely the doctrine of divine wrath is sound and health giving doctrine; why it is a truth to accept and to live by and not at all one to ignore or deny.

I. First, this doctrine helps us to understand and make sense of our world.

How, really, how can anyone in our day who believes in God at all, not accept the reality and the ferocity of divine wrath, given all the misery and the pain and the sorrow which has darkened our world? The Bible says it is all the result of sin and of God’s first judgment upon sin. There would be no sorrow, no misery, no death at all in our world, were it not for God’s hatred of sin and his holy determination to punish it and to visit that punishment upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate him. So, seeing our world with all its woe, how God must hate sin to punish it so.

Insofar as the greatest part of our salvation lies hidden for the world to come, is it not the simple fact that looking at God’s world, it is as easy to believe that its Maker and Ruler is a God of anger and wrath than it is to believe that he is a God of mercy and love?

Friends, of all people in the world, Christians should be people of the light, of the day, and of the truth, people who do not live by denying the truth all around them like the rest of the world. And the plain truth is that this world lies every day under the curse of God’s law for its wickedness—and that curse may be seen in every life, in every family, in every nation and seen in more ways than any of us cares to count. What a comforting and satisfying thing it is to know, that all the misery in this world, has a reason;

and a very good and noble reason—it is the ferocity of divine anger against human sin—it is the death which God visited upon human life because of its rebellion against its Maker. The law of God is in no way more profoundly vindicated than in the misery which eventuates when it is disobeyed. And we see that misery everywhere in God’s world.

II. Second, the doctrine of divine wrath helps greatly to make us a more serious people.

The Bible is a very serious book, full of serious matter. There is little levity in it; and, if you read its teachings carefully, you will find that there is little levity or lightness in the life which it commends to us who are followers of Jesus Christ.

Denying oneself and the world to follow Christ; gouging out eyes and cutting off limbs; taking up the cross every day; entering into the fellowship of our Savior’s sufferings; being, each day, as sheep to be slaughtered for Jesus’ sake; beating our bodies to bring them into submission; hungering and thirsting for righteousness; fighting the good fight of faith; putting on each day the whole armor of God by which to resist the flaming arrows of the Evil One, working out our salvation in fear and trembling, and on and on. It is all very serious; and the chief reason for all of that is that the stakes are so shudderingly immense—heaven or Hell, the love and favor of God, or his wrath and curse; eternal life, or everlasting doom.

And it is a sense of those stakes, a sense of the immensity of the issues of life or death, of salvation or damnation which drives every godly man or woman to live a very serious life.

Richard Baxter put it this way: “Seriousness is the very thing wherein consists our sincerity. If thou art not serious, thou art not a Christian. It is not only a high degree in Christianity, but the very life and essence of it. As fencers on a stage differ from soldiers fighting for their lives, so hypocrites differ from serious Christians.”

Well, nothing makes us so serious as was David, or Paul or our Savior himself, as the constant recognition that those who are untrue to Christ, who do not love him with their hearts and lives, will finally be exposed to the Lord Almighty’s intractable animosity against sin.

III. Third, this doctrine of divine wrath helps greatly to whet our

zeal to make Christ and salvation known to the lost. The lost: that is what they are, if they remain under God's curse and fall finally under his wrath full force.

Does the peril, the impending doom of people round about us really touch us? Does it drive us to warn them and call upon them to believe in Christ that they may be saved from the very real wrath to come? Are we constrained by the knowledge of what will befall those who are outside of Christ to say that we are a debtor to all men, and "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel." Do we have such a clear sight of that punishment which God will visit upon such people that we are desperate to be sure that none of their blood is upon our hands or heads because we did not warn them?

Is it so with us, as it has been with other Christians that the reality of hell and the judgment of God rests so heavily upon us that it colors all of our speech to the unsaved and gives a force and a passion to it that is like nothing else they ever experience:

Yea, this man's brow, like to a title leaf,
Foretells the nature of a tragic volume.
Thou tremblest, and the whiteness in thy cheek
Is apter than thy tongue to tell thine errand.

IV. And then, finally, this doctrine of divine wrath, embraced without reservation as the truth of God, will wonderfully deepen our joy!

Does that surprise you; how such a gloomy and terrifying reality as the fierce anger and judgment of God could deepen our joy? Well it does. Indeed, I will go further and say that without a living sense of the wrath of God and its ferocity, one can never rejoice in Christ and in his great salvation as profoundly as a Christian can and should.

It is only the man who has nearly died of thirst who knows how truly good a drink of water can be; only the man who has been sick unto death who knows how great a thing it is to be healthy, and it is only the person who has some clear sense of what would have been his lot in hell, who knows how unspeakably grand and thrilling a thing it is to have been saved by Christ and promised eternal life in heaven. It is only the man who has felt the fires

of hell licking at his feet, who knows how glorious it truly is to feel the fresh, clean air of heaven in his face.

If you want to faint with the joy of Paradise, as Dante did, then you must as he did first travel through the regions of hell and take the measure of the difference between what you deserve and what God is going to give you because you have been saved by Christ, through faith in Him.

Hosea and all the other writers of Scripture with Him either explicitly teach, and sometimes at great length, that God is angry with the wicked and is determined to unleash his wrath against them, or assume that fact as the basis for everything else that they say in calling upon all men everywhere to believe in Jesus Christ that they may be saved from the wrath to come. No true Christian life or experience—no depth of seriousness or zeal or joy—can be known apart from this solemn and solemnizing fact. And so you and I must resist the modern effort to set aside this truth, and instead, receive it, believe it, meditate upon it, and live by it every day.

Our God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, said of those who do not trust in him or follow his ways: “They will fall by the sword; their little ones will be dashed to the ground, their pregnant women ripped open.”

Prepare to meet thy God!