

October 17, 2010

Three Cheers for Brimstone:  
Why Deep Down You Want a God Who Judges

a sermon on Psalm 7  
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Good thing God is not like a politician. Politicians watch the polls carefully because they live by popularity. If they lose popular support, they will soon be out of a job. So they watch the polls, find out what the voters care about, and then they adjust their persona and their message to please as many as possible. As I say, it is a good thing God is not like that, because if he were in the business of making people happy and meeting our expectations, his job would be impossible. Consider the following conundrum, and see if you can help me figure it out.

People want a God who does not judge. They do not like hellfire and brimstone preaching. Some of you fit into that category. Some of you grew up with it, and having been fed a steady diet of eternal damnation throughout your formative years, you have come by your distaste for it honestly. I appreciate your feeling, though I think it is a sad situation. Christianity teaches that our actions have consequences, eternal consequences, and therefore we need a Savior. Some preacher, who was no doubt very sincere, focused on this one thing so much that it ruined this teaching for you. Jesus talked about hell, but not all the time. Honestly, it is not a pleasant subject. The only good I can see in it is that once you realize what Jesus has saved you from, you will be truly grateful. As Jesus said of the woman who anointed his feet with perfume, "She has loved much because she was forgiven much."

We don't like hellfire and brimstone. We don't even like a God who judges us. Some churches today prefer not to talk about sin. It's such a negative word. Even those of us who still use the word *sin* prefer to focus on the kinder, gentler side of God. Sermons about God's grace and love always draw good reviews. I can say that from experience. When I preach a strong sermon about grace, I always get many compliments. When I preach a sermon about the cost of following Jesus or how you must die to yourself or your need to repent, compliments are fewer.

Outside the church, the situation is much worse. The moral code in America today says, "Anything you want to do is OK, so long as you do not hurt anyone else, at least too directly." The one thing it is not OK to do is pass moral judgment on someone else. Christian ideas such as sin, judgment, a God who judges, and hell are scorned and/or laughed at. "Who takes that stuff seriously? Only those dangerous, religious nuts."

That's the attitude. The message about a God who judges could not be more unpopular. People do not want to hear it. They do not want God to be like that.

*At the same time*, however, they complain about the prevalence of evil in the world. Many claim that they cannot believe in the God of the Bible because there is simply too much evil. They look at all the suffering in the world and conclude that if there is a God, he cannot be loving and all-powerful. A good God would not allow such things if he could possibly do anything about it.

And we Christians have to admit that we struggle with this ourselves. The existence of evil and so much suffering are the most legitimate objection to the gospel. I do not believe it is a fatal objection. We see Jesus hanging on the cross, and we realize something mysterious is going on. Suffering does not defeat God's purposes. I am certain that God has earned our trust, in spite of the many things we do not understand. My purpose today is not to try to answer this question again. I have done that often in the past. Instead, I merely want to point out that many people – both Christians and others – complain about evil and suffering and wonder why God tolerates so much of it. Why doesn't God strike down evil-doers?

I wonder if this does not make hypocrites of us all. We complain that God allows too much evil, then we tell him we don't want judgment. I remember years ago at a supper club held in someone's home – it was not at this church – talk turned to a case that had broken in the news that week in which a man had kidnapped, horribly abused, and then murdered a young girl. We men were sitting on the porch. We were disgusted, shocked, and angry. The common consensus was that the perpetrator ought to be given a taste of his own medicine. We were right to be angry. What happened was outrageous. That heinous crime cried out for justice. We wanted justice and we wanted revenge, even though none of us knew the victim, who lived in another state.

Yet in that group were men who struggled with passages in the Bible that portray God's wrath. They liked, for example, the beautiful picture of the New Jerusalem at the end of the book of the Revelation. God dwelling among his people. No more death. No more sorrow or pain. They wondered why God had to go and mess it up by including this in the otherwise poetic description of heavenly bliss: "But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death" [Rev 21.8]. Confronted with evil, they reacted in anger; but they would deny that same anger to God because God is supposed to be loving and merciful.

Of course, if you had asked them, they would have allowed God to be angry with and punish that awful man. But they would probably want to reserve God's wrath for evil-doers like him. Hell is OK – most people think – so long as it is for Hitler, bin Laden, and their ilk. It's just not for normal people like us who lie, cheat, live for ourselves,

and ignore the needs of our neighbors; who are proud and vain; who do not honor God or give him thanks as we ought; who secretly want to be God; who abuse power when we get it, however little we get; who enjoy dozens of the more respectable sins. We want a gentlemen's agreement with one another: I'll overlook your transgressions, so long as you don't go too far, and you overlook mine. And we get frustrated that God refuses to play along. The truth is, we want judgment for the other guy and mercy for ourselves. If your car gets stolen, you want to thief to do time. If your teenage son steals a car, well, he's a good boy, and everyone deserves a second chance. If your spouse tells you a lie, you nurture a grudge for years. If you lie to your spouse, well, why is it such a big deal? That's human nature. That's part of our brokenness. That's also why it is a good thing God does not take directions from us. God is God, and he is true to himself, no matter what the polls say. Thank God for that.

Unlike most of us in the modern world, the psalms celebrate God's judgment. The psalms love the image of God as a judge, and they cry out for God to rise up and judge the world! Why is this? Our psalm today is a case in point. The very heart of it comes in verse 6: "Rise up, O LORD, in your anger; lift yourself up against the fury of my enemies; awake, O my God; you have appointed a judgment."

Last Sunday I explained a little about how justice worked in ancient Israel. When a person felt wronged, he went to the judge or the village elders. The other party was brought in. They each stated their case, and a verdict was returned. A very important New Testament term comes from the law court: justification. It means being put right with God. Originally it meant the judge ruled in your favor. You were declared to be in the right. You were justified.

Ancient Israelites like the psalmist had a big advantage over us when it came to the theme of God's judgment. Our lives are relatively comfortable and safe. Our nation is not near the bottom of the economic food chain, as theirs was. They were often oppressed. For them, suffering was not a philosophical puzzle; it was a painful, personal reality. They got pushed around a lot, so you can see why they were eager for God to judge. They were on the bottom. They were suffering. Judgment would mean God would put a stop to it. He would find in their favor. He would vindicate them, justify them. He would punish the wicked who were hurting them.

Psalm 7 is not one of the communal cries for justice. It is the prayer of an individual who has been wrongly accused. The superscription says it was written by David because of a problem he had with a man named Cush from the tribe of Benjamin. There's nothing about Cush anywhere else in the Bible, so we do not know the story, but we do know that David had on-going conflict with the tribe of Benjamin because the previous king, Saul, was from the tribe of Benjamin. David was from the tribe of Judah, and the Benjaminites never gave up the idea that one of them should be king.

In any case, the song writer has been falsely accused of breaking a covenant. His accuser claims he dealt treacherously with a friend, a very serious crime in the ancient world. The song writer insists he is innocent, and he calls upon God to judge his case. When he claims to be innocent, he is not saying he is morally perfect, merely that he is innocent of the crime he has been accused of. His accusers are lying, because they want to hurt him. He asks God to bring their evil upon their own heads.

If you know the book of Esther, you can see why Psalm 7 was read in the synagogue on Purim. The evil Haman wanted to exterminate the Jews. He accused them of not being loyal to the king of Persia. God was working, however, through the life of a Jewish woman named Esther. Haman was hung on the gallows he had built for the innocent Jew Mordecai.

Psalm 7 cries out for God to judge the wicked and to put things right. This longing is typical of the psalms and the Old Testament generally. God's judgment is seen as a very positive thing. It's about fixing what's broken and making creation what it ought to be.

We need to learn from this. We need to take a more positive view of God's judging. We need to understand that God's anger and judgment are not incompatible with his love and grace. The quote on the cover of the bulletin this week gets it right: God's anger "is a distillation of his justice, his hatred of evil. It is what we would want, even demand, from a good God" [Mark Buchanan, *Your God Is Too Safe*, 33].

God judges because he loves. He is against sin because sin is whatever destroys life-giving relationships – either our relationships with other people or with God. God loves his creation and he hates to see it destroyed. He hates to see us destroy one another, even ourselves. We tend to think God should leave us alone if we're not hurting anyone but ourselves, but he doesn't. And that's because he loves us. A teenage girl gets on drugs. She tells her father, "I'm not hurting anyone but myself." That's no comfort to him. "You're hurting me," he says. She's hurting him because she's hurting herself and he loves her. God cares for us that way.

God's love for us puts him in a tough situation. Earlier I said that if your car gets stolen, you want justice. If your child steals a car, you want mercy. In every sin, God sits on both sides of that. The person who is hurt is God's own dear child. Naturally he is going to be angry and demand justice. At the same time, however, the perpetrator is also his own dear child, so he is going to want mercy. We human beings would resolve that dilemma by punishing the sins we consider really bad and letting the other stuff go. But God is not like us. He loves us too much to settle for anything less than his beautiful dream for us. So he will not let any sin go unpunished, no matter how minor. But again, he loves us and does not want to destroy us.

God's answer to his dilemma is the cross. There he took upon himself the consequences of our sin. He drank the cup of his own righteous anger. Innocent Jesus, who was God-in-the-flesh, paid the price for our guilt. Because of this, sin is dealt with. Justice reigns. Righteousness wins. And yet God is able to have mercy upon us. Forgiveness is possible for those we repent and accept what Jesus did for them.

"There is now no condemnation," Paul wrote, "for those who are in Christ Jesus." Because Jesus has taken the fear out of judgment, we can again see it as a positive thing. Judgment Day is the day when God raises the dead and makes all things new. After Judgment Day, there will be no more death, no more sorrow, no more sin. We will love perfectly, just as God does. We will at last become the persons we were created to be. We will be beautiful, and we will find in God our true joy and contentment.

Listening to me describe it, you might want Judgment Day to come now. You may wonder why it has not come already. The answer is, I believe, that God is patient. We see this in various places in scripture: the idea that God withholds judgment in the hope that more people will repent. The sermon I remember most vividly from my youth was about that. The pastor said that sometimes we sin, and nothing happens. We assume God is not displeased with us, that we will get away with it. In reality, God is giving us time to come to our senses and repent. God is very patient that way. Scripture always says so. Yet it warns his patience does have a limit. There remains a very dark side to God's judgment, at least for those who will not repent.

I picture it this way. Jesus stands before us and says, "I am making a new world. All the evil and suffering you hate in this world will not be part of my new world. It will be a world of peace, love, and harmony. A world of fulfillment instead of frustration. Best of all, you will see God face to face. You will be overwhelmed by his glory. You have no idea how wonderful God is, but you will. So come with me. The way you are now, you can't get to this world. You'd mess it up for yourself and others. I am going to have to change you, but don't worry. I can do it. When I am through with you, you will shine like the stars. Follow me, and I will take you there." What would you do? I'd follow him. I would ask him to get me there, even if he had to carry me, which he probably will. But not everyone would. Some will always cling to the old world, the dying world. John 3.16 you know. Do you know what comes after it? "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. *And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.*"

What happens to those who refuse to leave the darkness and come into the light? What happens to those who hold on to the present order of things? Loving self more than God and the joys of this life more than the joys of heaven, they refuse God's grace.

God's judgment can be a terrible thing. It can be the ultimate loss. You might think God should save everyone, drag them into heaven where they want to be there or not, make them holy whether they want to be or not. God doesn't do it that way. If he did, we would complain he was taking away our freedom. No matter what God does, it seems, we complain. Good thing he doesn't worry about gaining our approval.

Instead, he invites us to live on his terms. He commands us to repent and believe the Good News. He offers us the grace of forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. It is more than we deserve – any of us.

It turns out that the best God we could possibly hope for is one who judges and condemns evil. There is right and there is wrong. Our world is full of evil and suffering. Our moral compasses may not be completely accurate, but we are not so blind that we cannot see things are not right. Only God can make them right. Only God can establish justice. Deep down we want him to do that. At the same time, we also want mercy. We know that we are part of the problem. Every human being is. We are all broken – all sinners. The best God we could possibly hope for would be willing to forgive those who repent. So we ask of God the impossible: to give us justice and mercy both at the same time. Impossible? No. With God all things are possible! Jesus died for you, and he has made a place for you in God's new world, if only you will give yourself to him.

God will judge the world. You can count on it. Every human being will be called to account. *You* will be judged, ... but you will not be condemned, if you are in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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