The\_Wrath\_of\_God

Tonight's scripture reading comes from John chapter 18 verses 1 through 14.

1When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side, there was an olive grove, and he and his disciples went into it. 2Now Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples. 3So, Judas came to the grove, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns, and weapons. 4Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, “Who is it you want?” 5“Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “I am he,” Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) 6When Jesus said, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground. 7Again, he asked them, “Who is it you want?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” 8“I told you that I am he,” Jesus answered. “If you are looking for me, then let these men go.” 9This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: “I have not lost one of those you gave me.” 10Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.) 11Jesus commanded Peter, “Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?” 12Then the detachment of soldiers, with its commander and the Jewish officials, arrested Jesus. They bound him 13and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. 14Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it would be good if one man died for the people.

This is the word of the Lord.

Every single week we're taking a look at one of the attributes of God, and today we come to the attribute of God, according to the Bible, that probably gives modern Western people the shudders the most. The Bible says that the God of the Bible is the God of wrath. Because we're coming up to Easter, we're in a season in which the churches around the world reflect on the meaning of the cross, and what I would like to do is reflect on the wrath of God in light of the cross. So, we've taken this passage, which is one of the four accounts of Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before He was put to death. And when you first look at this, it doesn't seem to be much about wrath or anger, but it really is. Let's see, let's learn from this passage that God's wrath is:

1. 1)  warranted wrath,
2. 2)  it's controlled wrath,
3. 3)  and it's absorbed wrath.

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It's warranted, it's controlled, it's absorbed.

Point one, it's warranted. Now, the first three verses tell us that when Jesus and the disciples got to the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas, who was engineering the arrest, knew that they would go there. And verse three says, so Judas came to the grove, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns, and weapons. Now, first notice the range of people who are coming to arrest Jesus. Jew and Gentile, see, Roman soldiers as well as officials from the chief priests and Pharisees. Not only is that Jew and Gentile, that's blue collar and cultural elite, because the priests and the Pharisees were the elites and the Roman soldiers were the blue collar guys. It's also both religious and irreligious. The Roman soldiers weren't particularly religious, or put another way, pagans and Bible believers. And see, some anti-Semitic groups over the years have tried to pin Jesus' death on the Jews. But over and over again in the Gospels, we see very deliberately I'm sure, John is showing us, that every class, the whole range of classes, the whole range of races, as it were, the whole range of religion, irreligious, religious, Bible, everybody comes to attack Jesus. And that's the main point.

The main point is, when they're coming with weapons, when they're coming with chains, when they're coming to arrest the Son of God, and then very soon we're going to see He's mocked, He's beaten, He's tortured, He's murdered. This is narratively depicting what the Bible teaches as a propositional truth. What's the propositional truth? Romans 5: 10, While we were enemies, Christ died for us. Enemies! And then Romans 8, verse 7 and 8, the natural mind, that's our mind in its natural state, the natural mind is enmity toward God. It does not submit to God's law. Indeed, it cannot. Enmity is hatred. And it says our mind is enmity toward God. What is being depicted here with the weapons and the clubs and coming to arrest the Son of God and torture and murder Him, what's depicted narratively is what is taught by the Bible, and that is that we don't just disbelieve in God, we don't just resist God, we're mad at Him. We're lethally mad at Him. We hate Him.

Every human being until the Holy Spirit changes is an enemy of God. We hate Him. And I know what you're thinking. I know what almost everybody's thinking. I can't really relate to that. Some of you say, I don't really know if I believe in God. Some of you say, so how could I hate Him? Some say, well, I don't believe God like I should, I don't have enough faith, or I don't obey Him like I should, but I don't hate Him. But let's think about this. First of all, the human heart hates anything that threatens its self-sovereignty. The human heart pushes back and hates anything that threatens our self-sovereignty, our mastery of our own life, because what the human heart wants more than anything else to be is our own master and our own lords. And anything that threatens it triggers anger.

And that's the for example, St. Augustine gave this classic illustration. In his confessions, he's reflecting on the fact that when he was a boy, he stole pears from his neighbor's

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orchard. And he's reflecting years later on why he did it. Why did I steal those pears? In light of two things. One is, he says, first of all, I wasn't hungry. But secondly, he said, I don't really like pears. So why, if you're not hungry and you don't really like pears, why did he steal the pears? And he says, I remember the answer. It's because I was told not to get them. I was forbidden. He says, I wanted them because they were forbidden. In other words, the prohibition against pears triggered that part of your heart that says, nobody tells me what to do. I am the master of my faith. I am the captain of my soul. Now, by the way, if a prohibition against pears triggers that, what do you think Jesus Christ does?

You know, you've probably heard, maybe you heard it from me, that if you read the Gospel accounts, you'll see that no one ever responds to Jesus Christ moderately. No, but if you take a look at the Gospels, you'll see when people hear Jesus, they see him doing things, they hear him teaching, nobody sits and says, that's very thought-provoking, very thought- provoking. I have to think about that. No! What people... either people are terrified, they say, depart from me, or they're furious and they attack him, or in the most traumatic thing that any human being can do, they surrender to him. But nobody responds moderately. You know why? The theological and psychological answer to that question is that Jesus Christ, more than any other thing, more than any other person, triggers that natural hatred we have for anything that threatens our self-sovereignty. Because he says, he makes incredible claims. He says, I'm your Lord, I'm your judge. He says, no one can follow me unless you hate your father and mother and even your own life. What's that mean? It means I must be number one. I must have a full priority. I say how you should live, and that triggers the hate.

The Bible says, we don't just disbelieve in God, we hate him. And I know a lot of you are saying, I still just can't relate to that. Well, let me suggest a couple of thoughts. Psychologists will tell you that your deepest hates you hide from yourself so they can do their dirty work. Years ago, you might have been confronted and saying, you're bitter, or you hate her, or you hate him. And you said, I'm not bitter. No, I'm not happy with her. I'm not bitter. I don't hate him. But you were, and you did, and you see it now. And I'm trying to make the same point here about God.

Here's one way. One of the ways that you hide your hatred of God from yourself is by creating pictures of God in your mind that you can control, that you can lead away in chains, that you can master. We hate the God of the Bible because you can't master him. What we really want is a God that you can control, that you can chain up, that you can arrest, that you're on top of. And so, we create in our mind a view of God that we say, that's the God I believe in. Oh, I believe in God. I believe in a God of love. That's the God I believe in. I don't hate God. But the very fact that you have to create a God that you can master shows that you hate a God that you can't.

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Some years ago, R. C. Sproul, a good Christian teacher, was trying to teach on this subject. And he told a story, and this shows how old he is, and how old I am, and how old the illustration is. He said he was watching on TV. He was watching David Frost on his talk show interviewing Madeleine Murray O'Hare, who was a very activist atheist. And as they were debating whether it was a God, David Frost was losing because she, Madeleine Murray O'Hare, was a very smart woman. And he was losing. So, in desperation, he turned to the studio audience and said, how many of you believe in God? And almost everybody raised their hand. See, he won. Reality TV. She was voted out, I guess. So how many of you believe in God? They all raised their hand. R. C. said, well, Madeleine Murray O'Hare really missed her chance because she just sat there and glowered at him. But what she could have done is this. She could have said, “Ah. Let me restate the question. How many of you believe in the God of the Bible? The God who, when He descends on Mount Sinai, says anybody who touches the mountain must be killed. The God who says, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy. The God who, when He's present in the Ark of the Covenant and someone touches that Ark, they die. The God who has Job go through horrendous suffering, and then He shows up at the end of the book of Job, and He says, I'm not going to even tell you why it happened to you. I just want you to trust me because I'm God and you're not. How many of you believe in that God?” And R. C. says, “Maybe nobody would have raised their hand.” You know why? We hate that God. And the fact that we create gods, pictures of God, that are under arrest, under our arrest, that we've controlled, shows that we hate the God that we can't master.

Or let me give you another example. It's not just our theological waffliness, which is actually a sign of our enmity toward God. Religion is. There's another way to try to tame God, arrest God, master God, control Him, and that is in religion. The religious view of God goes like this. If I live a good life, if I pray, if I read the Bible, if I do good things, then God has to bless me. Do you know what you're doing?

I was recently, I got to watch again the great movie Amadeus. You know, it's about Salieri and Mozart. And by the way, whenever you see that movie, you always have to remember that it's very fictional. The real Salieri and Mozart might have been very different, were very different. But inside the movie, here's what you have. Salieri says, “When I was a boy, I really loved God, and I gave the most noble prayer a boy could pray.” He said, “Lord, make me a great composer. Bring great music into the world through me so that people praise my very name, so that I would be immortal, immortally famous. Make me a great composer and use me like that.” And he says, “in exchange, if you do that, I will give you my chastity. I will give you my industry.” In other words, he was a very good person. He was very devoted. He helped the poor. He was sexually chaste. He makes a big point of that. You know, he lived a very, very good life, and he asked God, make me the good composer and use me. But eventually, he came to realize that the gift he was asking God for, and that he had worked so hard for, had been given to Mozart, a man of considerably more, at least inside the movie,

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inferior moral attainments, moral condition. And when Salieri realized that he had given this unworthy person, in spite of all of his hard work, he'd given him the gift, there's one very dramatic scene, you know, where he's looking at the crucifix on the wall. Kathy and I first saw Amadeus in 1984 in a theater in the middle of South Philadelphia, you know, which is a very blue-collar Catholic neighborhood. And I'll never forget, Salieri looks up at this crucifix. Once he realizes what God has done, and he's not answering his prayer, he looks up and he says, “From now on, we are enemies, you and I.” And then he takes the crucifix and he throws it into the fire. Everybody in the theater gasped. I don't think that would happen anymore, even in South Philly. But it was very dramatic. What he was saying is, “I loved God, and I gave my life to God, and God did this to me. He owed me! And from now on, we are enemies.” Don't you realize? You always were his enemy. Look at that original prayer, very modest, “Make me the greatest composer in the generation. And I'm going to do all these things, so you have to give it to me.” What is that? That is not the biblical God, a God of grace. That's a God that you can control through your good works. And the only reason why you create a God like that is because you hate the God of the Bible. You want a God under arrest. You want a God that you can lead off in chains. You see that?

You're hiding from yourself. Look, when I look at my own life, I cannot understand myself, and you can't, I don't think, can understand yourself, until you begin to see you don't really just disbelieve in God or fail to do what you ought to do. You are mad at Him in all kinds of ways. The way we do theology is an expression of that, because we resist what the Bible says about God. The way we do our religious faith, we resist the idea of the gospel of grace, and we basically try to create religions of good works, etc. All these things are ways. And then the way we work very hard, and then when God doesn’t give us what we want, He crosses our will, you say “You're an enemy of mine,” “No! You always were an enemy, or you wouldn't feel that way.”

When I look at my prayer life, I can never hold on to really... You know, I have this wonderful... God does something for me, and I open my heart to Him, and I feel His presence, and I'm so grateful. You know, three days later, my heart is cold. Why? Because the heart is saying, what are you doing for me lately, God? There is a deep ingratitude, a deep sense of entitlement, a deep understanding that, you know, God owes me. We hate the idea of a God who we can't master, and who is our master. And you're not going to understand your own emotions. You're not going to understand your attitudes toward life. You're not going to understand your personal history. You're not going to understand yourself unless you see that we are characterized by wrath.

What you have in this beginning part of this passage is the wrath of the human race against God. But here's the point of this first point, and that is, is that just? God has given you everything. God has given you existence. God sustains your life. He's given us everything. He sustains our life. He holds us together. He keeps us alive every second. And therefore,

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He says, “Now serve me.” And that is a rightful request. He gives us everything. “Now serve me.” But our response is fury. He makes a rightful request, “Serve me,” because He's given us everything. And we make an unrightful response, which is to be angry.

And you know what that means? God is justly angry at our unjust anger. God is justly angry at us because of our unjust anger toward Him. He is warranted in His wrath against our unwarranted wrath against Him. And if you don't believe that the human race hates Him, all of us, regardless of race, regardless of class, if you don't believe it, here's the ultimate proof that in this brief period of time in which the God of the universe became vulnerable, we killed Him. And we all did. So, in some ways, to me, the main point of the passage is to show you how warranted God's wrath is.

But that's not all. The second thing we learn here is how controlled God's wrath is. The middle part is really strange. Jesus is in complete control. Verse 4 says everything He knew was happening according to plan. And when He goes out and says, “Who do you want?” to the crowd, the mob, the crowd says, Jesus of Nazareth. And the English translation says His response is, I am He. But that's not true to the Greek text. They were just trying to smooth it out, make it sound a little bit less confusing. But in the Greek, all He says is two words, “I am.” Why does He say that? It's not grammatically correct, but it's theologically correct. Because when Moses met God in the burning bush and said, “Who are you? Who should I say sent me?” God says, “My name is I Am. Tell them I Am sent you.” And in John chapter 8, verses 58 to 59, Jesus has already taken the divine name once before. He says in John 8, “before Abraham was, I Am.” And everybody knew what He was saying. They knew He was claiming to be God. They knew He was taking the divine name on. And they were angry at Him. But something happens here that's very strange. He walks forward. They ask for Jesus of Nazareth. He says, “I Am.” And they all fall down. All their knees buckle. And it's especially amazing that the Roman soldiers that would have happened. These are battle- hardened guys. And I don't care what tone of voice Jesus had, it was not going to intimidate them. And they can't even stand on their feet. They all fall down. Why? Commentators say it looks like for a brief second, a ray of glory got out. Veiled in flesh, the Godhead, we sing. Jesus' glory, Jesus' infinite glory and power is veiled. It's covered. It's hidden. But for one second, it shows itself in order for us to see, and maybe for them to see, that here is a God, a divine figure of infinite power, who is holding it back. Why? “Put up your sword, Peter.” Why? We just said that here we have the perfect depiction of God's... of humanity's unjust anger toward God. They're coming in... what an act of injustice. They're coming to arrest Him. They're coming to take Him away. Isn't this a time for God to express His wrath?

Remember the end of Raiders of the Lost Ark? You know, the Ark of the Covenant. That's the holy ark. And, you know, this is God's ark. And these guys come and they steal it. And then what they do, they lift off the cover, and God's... and this is a cartoon, sci-fi, thriller- action movie. And the God of a cartoon, sci-fi, thriller-action movie does exactly what you

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saw. He zaps them. Wrath of God, you know. He electrocutes them. He melts a few, you know. Remember, if you're a little kid watching it for the first time, you go, oh, wrath of God. Don't mess with God. Yeah, and that's how God acts in a cartoon. This is a real God because these are the raiders. And they've not come after the ark. They've come after the real deal. They've come after the Messiah. And yet the real God controls His wrath. Why? Two reasons. The first reason is because God's wrath is always controlled. And here's a very important point to make. We get offended very much by the idea of the wrath of God, angry God. We don't like this idea, but we have to always remember that everything the Bible says about God is partially... is partially. We call it analogical language. So, when we say God is like a human shepherd, it doesn't mean He's completely like every human shepherd. It means He's like a human shepherd in some respects. When we say God is a father, it means He's like a father in some respects. When we say God is angry, when God has wrath, we have to be very careful. We're not saying God's anger is like our anger in every respect. No! Especially when you realize that when... see, when we get angry or we see other people get angry, usually it's peak, it's ego, it's crankiness, and it's always losing one's temper. And afterwards, we wish he hadn't said this or did this, right? That's not part of God's wrath at all. You've got to get rid of that. That's one of the reasons why people get offended because they're overdoing it.

When we talk about God's wrath, it's a way of talking about His settled opposition to evil, His absolutely settled opposition to evil and injustice, something you want in a God. But God's wrath is... that's why I like the term wrath, by the way, because it's an older English word, and it's a little bit more, I don't know, venerable or something. It gets away from this idea. God's wrath is never temper. God is controlled here because His wrath is always under control. It's never crankiness, it's never temper.

But the second reason why God's wrath is under control is because of the third point, and the third point is that at this moment in the history of the world, God's wrath is being absorbed. Cut to the chase. Jesus turns to Peter and says, “Put away your sword.” Remember, in Matthew, Matthew records Him saying to Peter also, you know, “I could have called twelve legions of angels, but we're not expressing the wrath of God on these men. We're not expressing the wrath of God on these men. Put away your sword,” He says to Peter. Why? “Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?” And in that passage, in that little phrase, you've got something so amazing. The cup of the Father. You have a combination of terms that we modern people feel like can't be combined, and yet they are combined, and it's the secret of what happened on the cross. See, cup means wrath. In ancient times, sometimes you executed criminals by giving them a cup of poison. That's how they executed Socrates, remember? They would give a criminal a cup of poison. And that's the reason why in the Old Testament, God's wrath, His judicial opposition against evil and injustice is depicted in blood-curdling ways as a cup. The metaphor is a cup of poison. So, in Ezekiel 23, it says, you shall drink the cup of His wrath of ruin and desolation, and you will

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tear your breasts. You know, the person who's drinking the poison, they stagger, and their insides are burning up. Or Isaiah 54 says, you will drink the cup of His fury, and you will stagger. So, this is a blood-curdling statement of the fact that God is angry. He has warranted wrath against our unwarranted wrath. But it's the cup of the Father. It doesn't even say cup of God. That'd be one thing. But the Father, what does the Father mean in the book of John? What does the Father mean in general? What does Jesus mean when He calls God Father? He's talking about love. He's talking about affection. He's talking about patience. And we say, these two things can't come together. If He's really a loving God, a Father, there shouldn't be a cup. And if He's got a cup, then He's not a loving Father. And what Jesus says is, that's not true. He is both. And by talking about the cup of the Father, by using term cup of the Father, He's telling Peter and He's telling you and me what happened on the cross. On the cross, He drank the cup of the Father. And if you don't understand that, your own life cannot be changed.

Here's what I mean. I've had many people tell me over the years, “I don't believe in a God of judgment. I don't believe in a God who sends people to hell. I don't believe in a God of wrath. I don't believe God's wrath is on all of us. I think He loves people.” And I say, “Do you believe in Jesus?” And very often they'll say, “Yes, I do.” “Well, why did Jesus come and die on the cross?” And they say, “Just to show us God's love. Just to show us God's love. That's all.” Dr. Roger Nicole, my professor at Gordon Conwell Seminary, used to tell a story like this. He says, “What if you and a friend were standing side by side and you're watching a bonfire, and all of a sudden your friend says, let me show you how much I love you. And he runs and throws himself into the fire and dies. Would you say, ‘Behold how he loved me?’” No, you would say, “What was he on?” But if you're standing in front of a burning house and your child's in the house, and your friend runs into that house and saves your child and dies in the attempt, then you say, “Behold how he loved us.” And Dr. Nicole says, “Don't you realize if Jesus Christ dies, gives His life on the cross, and we're not in any trouble, we don't have the wrath of God on us, we're not on our way to eternity without God, we're not lost, then His death isn't a sign of love, its outrageous, its wicked or its crazy. But if on the cross He's doing what He says He's doing, drinking the cup of wrath, what He's doing is He's actually fulfilling what Caiaphas, without knowing it, prophesied about. Caiaphas was just saying, we better squash this guy so the Romans don't come down on us. That man should die that we live. Oh, Caiaphas didn't realize what he was talking about. He was actually pointing to substitutionary atonement, which means Jesus Christ coming in as a substitute, taking the wrath of God, paying the price, bearing the punishment. On the cross He said, “Father, forgive them.” On the cross He said, “It is finished. I finished it.” What was He doing? He was drinking the cup, but He was drinking the cup of the Father. What does that mean? The cross shows how God can love us and be absolutely just at the same time. Cup of the Father, means He's equally just and equally loving at the same time. And only if you see Jesus Christ taking the wrath of God will you really see the magnitude of His love.

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If you really say, I just believe in a God who loves everybody, I just believe in a God who loves everybody, that's a sentimental view of God. And if you look at that, is that going to change you? But if you believe, I deserve the wrath of God for my unjust anger. There's this deserved anger, and Jesus took it. First of all, it tells you He wasn't just suffering nails and thorns in His skull up there. He was taking the wrath of God on. Until you believe in the wrath of God, you can't really believe in the love of God, at least not at this level, not at this magnitude. And you'll never, ever have your heart changed by the sight of the love of God on the cross.

If you raise a child with just love and never laying down a law, or lots and lots of rules, and no love and affection, you'll ruin that kid. But right now, most people are growing up either with a view of God that's mainly judgment, you know, God laying down the rules, you better be good, and you live a life of fear, and that doesn't deal with your anger, it just makes it worse. Or some people are growing up with a view of God that He's a very loving God, and He just loves everybody, and He's there to meet my needs. But that's not going to deal with your anger either, because as life goes on, He's not going to give you the life you want, and you feel like you deserve. You'll be like Salieri. But only if you believe that on the cross, Jesus Christ drank the cup of the Father, that on the cross, the justice of God and the love of God were being fulfilled at the same time and equally. Only if you see Him drinking the cup of the Father will that humble you out of your anger and affirm you out of your anger. It'll affirm you and humble you out of that fear of making Him your master, because when you see Him doing that, you're going to say, “You can be my master. You deserve it.”

Let's not forget the words of that poet:

For Christ, your loving Savior hath drunk up the cup of God's fierce wrath. What bitter cups had been your due, had He not drank them up for you?

Let's pray.

Our Father, how we want to let Your love absorb not just the object of wrath of God against us on the cross, but also take away our own internal subject of anger toward You. And we do have a lot of it. And Lord, our lives are being distorted by it, and we pray that You would bring home to our hearts the reality of what Your Son did on the cross so that we might be more and more conformed in the image of Your Son. Take the anger that's in the middle of our lives out and fill the core, the heart of our soul with Your love.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.