

July 18/19, 2009

God of Vengeance

Psalm 94

2009 Summer Psalms Series

Pastor Bryan Clark

Oh God of vengeance, spring forth. It's maybe been a while since you opened a prayer with that line. That's how the Psalmist opens his. How are we able to gather and worship the greatness of our God against the backdrop of a world that is filled with such evil, such wickedness, such injustice, such pain and suffering? Are we just clueless to the world around us or is it possible that there's something about our God that we know is true, that allows us to say, "He is awesome," against the backdrop of such injustice in the world?

In our American culture we are very happy to embrace the concept that God is love. But we're very offended by the idea that God is a God of vengeance; He's a God of judgment; He's a God of anger; He's a God of wrath. Some would even say the idea of a God of wrath is contradictory to the concept of a God of love. Is that true? C.S. Lewis, in his book, *The Abolition of Man*, talks about the framework of our modern mind and why we are offended at the idea of a God of judgment. He contrasts the ancient world with the modern world in terms of our understanding of ultimate reality. In the ancient world they believed that, yes, there is a physical reality but beyond that there is a metaphysical world, the world of God, and that world was just as real as the physical world. Therefore they believed that to violate the principals of the metaphysical world had just as severe consequences as violating the principals of the physical world such as gravity or sticking your hand in a fire. Because of that it became necessary to conform our souls to the reality, the ultimate reality, of the metaphysical world which led to a desire for knowledge, for self-discipline, for virtue. But in the 16th and 17th century Modernism crept in. Modernism was all about control and power. It was a belief that through technology, through science and through reason, man could solve his own problems. There was very little need for God. We are now in control. The belief that not only could we control the physical world, spread out to that we can now control the metaphysical world. And, rather than believing that we must conform our souls to the ultimate reality of God, everything was turned upside-down and it was believed that now the metaphysical world must conform itself to our souls.

In other words we now are free to recreate God in our image, to redefine God so that we are free to live as we please, with no consequences. It gave birth to what we understand today as Postmodernism, that is driven by this idea that everyone is free to decide for themselves what's right and wrong, what's good and evil. We're now in control and we simply recreate God in our image so that we're free to live as we please, with no consequences. Therefore we're very willing to embrace a God of love but we're very offended by the idea that this God might actually judge us for the decisions and behaviors we have made.

Is it true that the concept of a God of vengeance, a God of wrath, a God of anger is contradictory to the idea of a God of love? Well let's talk about that this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Psalm 94. Nobody knows who wrote Psalm 94; it opens with a strong statement:

**O LORD, God of vengeance;
God of vengeance, shine forth!
Rise up, O Judge of the earth;
Render recompense to the proud.** (*NASB, Psalm 94: 1-2)

Some of the translations try to soften that word vengeance, but that's the Hebrew word. The Psalmist cries out to a God of vengeance and in simple terms he's saying, "*Oh God of vengeance, show up and do your thing!*" It might be helpful to understand in the Hebrew there's a difference between *vengeance* and *revenge*. Revenge is personal. You've done something to me so I'm going to get even with you. Revenge is driven by emotion. Vengeance is national. You're going to see in a couple of verses that the concern of the Psalmist is about the widows and the orphans and the weak and the poor—the disadvantaged, those that the wicked pray on. It's not just personal; it's national; it's about the injustices in the world. And it's not driven so much by emotion as it is a desire for things to be made right, for the desire to see justice in the world.

But let's think for a moment about this concept of a *God of love*. Those people in our culture that embrace that idea, I would ask them the same question that we asked two weeks ago: What is the basis by which you've concluded that God is love? Are you going to tell me that you look at a world filled with so much evil, so much pain and suffering, so much wickedness, so much injustice and your conclusion is God is love? That is quite a leap of faith. As a matter of fact it's a leap of faith I wouldn't be comfortable with. I believe God is love because God says He's a God of love and because, in a point in time, God demonstrated His love by entering into history and paying the price for sin. But I'm reminded the same book that says God is love is the same book that says God is a God of vengeance. God's a God of wrath; God's a God of anger. Why would you believe one thing out of *The Book* and not another?

But let's think about this concept that God is love but the idea of a God of wrath is contradictory. Is that true? Does that belief hold up to scrutiny? Let's imagine that someone you deeply love—could be a wife, could be a daughter—you choose—someone that you dearly love. Someone breaks into your house and brutally rapes, tortures and ultimately executes that person. The violator is caught and brought to court. There is no doubt that he's the one because he's proud of it, brags about it, celebrates it. In the courtroom he talks about how much fun it was. Then it comes time for the judge to pass sentence and the judge says, "You know, I love you all. This has been a wonderful time together; case dismissed." Is that love? To whom was that love? Do you, as family members of the victim, walk away saying, "I was dearly loved today"? That concept just doesn't hold up, doesn't work in a world full of injustice and wickedness and evil. It's because you dearly love that person that you're angry about what happened. The only way to walk away from that event and not be angry is to be totally indifferent. Indifference flows out of hatred, not out of love. It is precisely because God does love that He's angry at those people and those things that seek to destroy that which He loves. If you love, there are things that will make you angry when they destroy those who you love.

Becky Pippert says it better than I can. "Think how we feel when we see someone we love ravaged by unwise actions or relationships. Do we respond with benign tolerance as we might toward a stranger? Far from it! Anger isn't the opposite of love; hate is. And the final forum of hate is indifference. God's wrath is not a cranky explosion but His settled opposition to the cancer which is eating out the insides of the human race whom He loves with His whole being."¹

It is precisely because God is a God of love that God has anger, that God has wrath, that God will ultimately judge. The Psalmist understands that and he's crying out for God to come and do His thing for the sake of those who are being destroyed.

Verse 3:

**How long shall the wicked, O LORD,
How long shall the wicked exult?** (vs. 3)

That word **exult** is the Hebrew word that's usually translated "to be jubilant". In almost every case in the Old Testament, that word is used to describe the people of God as jubilant because of the righteousness of God. It's very unusual to have it represent the wicked. But the Psalmist is making a statement that, as excited as we are about the righteousness of God, the wicked are about their wickedness. They're not acting in a back alley, in the shadow. They're very pleased with themselves; they celebrate their evil.

Verse 4:

They pour forth words, (Vs. 4a)

That phrase **pour forth** is a Hebrew word that would be used to describe water gushing out the side of a mountain. These words *gush* out of their mouths. It literally could be translated, *belch out*. It's pretty graphic terminology to say that these people are pretty proud of what they've done. They like to get on the talk shows and talk about the evil that they have done.

**....they speak arrogantly;
All who do wickedness vaunt themselves.**
[It means they boast about it; they brag about it.]
**They crush Your people, O LORD,
And afflict Your heritage.
They slay the widow and the stranger,
And murder the orphans.** (Vs. 4b-6)

He's talking about those in the ancient culture that were most vulnerable—the weak, the at-risk, the vulnerable, the widows, the orphans, the strangers. The wicked prey upon the weak and those that are most at-risk.

Verse 7:

**They have said, "The LORD does not see,
Nor does the God of Jacob pay heed."**

The wicked are saying, "*Hey, God must not know; God must not care. Maybe He's not even up there.*" All we know is that there is no God striking us dead for our evil, so it just emboldens the wicked to be more wicked. It's very common in our world today because God hasn't struck the wicked dead. The conclusion is: He doesn't know or He doesn't care. Certainly we can conclude He's not going to do anything, which just further emboldens the wicked to be more wicked. Let's think about this concept again that God is love but there will be no judgment; there will be no wrath; there will be no vengeance. People that propose that believe that will make us all more loving. Is that true? I would suggest to you it's just the opposite. It's exactly what's being said in verse 7. When there is a belief that there are no consequences, there's no judgment, there's no wrath, there's no justice, at the end of the day, that doesn't make people more loving; it makes people more wicked.

Let's go back into our courtroom. The judge says, "I love you all. Case dismissed." If every judge had a pattern of responding that way, what do you suppose would happen? Would we, as a culture, become more law abiding or more lawless? I think it's obvious. We would become a more violent, more lawless culture. There's no consequence; there's no price to pay. More and more we here in the West have bought into this idea that God is love and there is no judgment. Would you say we're becoming a less violent culture? You can see the effects of this belief everyday in our world. The critics of religion often point out the evil and violence done in the name of religion down through history. And they're right about that. There's no sense denying that there's been a lot of evil done in the name of religion. Contrary to the relativist of this we can at least come back to a standard and say, "Yes, but we have a basis by which we can say that was wrong; that was evil; that doesn't represent the heart of God. It's just a tragedy!"

Christopher Hitchens in his book, *God is Not Great*, uses this argument to say, "That proves it; there can't be a God because look at all the evil done in the name of religion." But, what Christopher Hitchens fails to mention is the level of violence done in the name of atheism. One writer states that there has been more violence done in the name of atheism in the 20th century than was done in the name of religion in the previous nineteen centuries combined! One Polish Nobel prize-winning poet² who lived through both Nazism and Communism talks about this in a fascinating essay. He talks about Karl Marx's statement that religion is the opium of the people. Because people believe there's life after death, they're willing to tolerate the unfair conditions of this world. But this Polish poet goes on to say that Karl Marx was wrong. The opium of the people is Nihilism. It flows out of atheism, out of Nazism and Communism, because people believe when you die, that's it. There's no judgment; there's no accountability; there's no justice; there's no one to answer to. Therefore you are free to rape, to kill, to murder and destroy without consequence. His case would be that it was the view of Nihilism, nothingness after death, that drove the unimaginable violence of the 20th century.

As long as we as a culture are going to believe that God is love, but at the end of the day there are no consequences, we simply embolden wickedness to thrive. The Psalmist knows that. Verses 8 and 9 were written to an ancient culture but could have been written to us today. He's responding to verse 7 when they said, "*You know God hasn't done anything so apparently God doesn't know; God doesn't care.*" He says:

**Pay heed, you senseless among the people;
And when will you understand, stupid ones? (Vs. 8)**

That's getting right to the point, isn't it? He is saying, "*If, because God hasn't struck the wicked dead today, you think that means God doesn't care, God's indifferent, God's never going to hold people accountable, he say's 'You're senseless; you're out of your mind. When will you get a clue, stupid ones?'*" Hey, it's in the text. (laughter)

Verse 9:

**He who planted the ear, does He not hear?
He who formed the eye, does He not see?**

The argument is this: If God made your ear, don't you think this God hears? If God made your eye, don't you think this God sees? The Rabbi's actually had a three part formula, if you wish to keep it in mind, in order to keep one walking uprightly. Number one: there was an ear—there is an ear that hears everything. Number two: the eye—there is an eye that sees everything. And number three:

there is a hand that records it all in a book. There's an eye, there's an ear, and there's a hand. Therefore it very much matters how we live. That's what the Psalmist is saying: God does know and He does care and there will be a day of accountability.

**He who chastens [or disciplines] the nations, will He not rebuke,
Even He who teaches man knowledge?
The LORD knows the thoughts of man,
That they are a mere breath.** (Vs. 10-11)

The God that disciplines the people whom He loves, as a loving parent disciplines his or her children, if God is so involved with His own people, won't God judge the wicked? That's what he's saying there.

In verse 12 there's a bit of a change in the tone of the Psalm. *Blessed* is the Hebrew word that means *happy*.

**Blessed...[happy]...is the man whom You chasten, O LORD,
And whom You teach out of Your law;
That You may grant him relief from the days of adversity,
Until a pit is dug for the wicked.** (Vs. 12-13)

He's talking about how thankful he is that God loves them enough to discipline them, to correct them, to give them His law, to give them His knowledge, in order to guide their lives. If it's true that there's a God who will one day judge, if it is true there is a God that will hold us accountable, then how thankful they are that there is a God who cares enough to discipline us, to keep us on the right road, to give us His law, to give us His knowledge, to direct our lives. God would rather we experience His love than His vengeance.

Verse 14:

**For the LORD will not abandon His people,
Nor will He forsake His inheritance.
For judgment will again be righteous;
And all the upright in heart will follow it.
Who will stand up for me against evildoers?
Who will take his stand for me against those who do wickedness?** (Vs. 14-16)

The Psalmist is asking the questions, "*Who's going to stand up for that which is right? Who's going to stand up and protect the orphan? Who's going to stand up and protect the widow? Who's going to stand up and protect the poor?*" The Psalmist feels the helplessness within him. There's nothing he can do to stop it. It seems like the wicked are thriving and no one is stopping them. His ultimate belief in a God of vengeance is what brings him comfort in a world of so much injustice. There is a reminder in this Psalm that regardless of who is in the White House, government is not our answer; it never will be. At the end of the day, the only one who can make it right is God. The only one who brings hope is God. The only one ultimately we can trust in to do the right thing is God!

What drives the violence in the world today is a belief that there will be no judgment; there will be no justice. Therefore, because that's true, it's up to me to administer justice now. If you poke out my eye, I will poke out yours because, at the end of the day, there is no justice. So justice must be

mediated out now. That's what drives the violence in the world today. You hit me; I'll hit you—because it isn't made right in the end.

In the New Testament Jesus said, "Turn the other cheek." He said, "Love your neighbor." The only possible way we could do that is with a core belief that, at the end of the day, God makes it right. Therefore vengeance is not my responsibility. I can love with the love of Jesus knowing, at the end of the day, nobody gets away with anything. So I leave that with Him and I'm free to do the right thing now. That's what he's talking about here.

Verse 17:

**If the LORD had not been my help,
My soul would soon have dwelt in the abode of silence.**

In other words, "*If I didn't know God was going to make it right in the end, I'd have rolled over and died.*" That's what he's saying.

**If I should say, "My foot has slipped,"
Your lovingkindness, O LORD, will hold me up.
When my anxious thoughts multiply within me,
Your consolations delight my soul.
Can a throne of destruction be allied with You,
One which devises mischief by decree?
They band themselves together against the life of the righteous,
And condemn the innocent to death.
But the LORD has been my stronghold,
And my God the rock of my refuge.
He has brought back their wickedness upon them,
And will destroy them in their evil;
The LORD our God will destroy them. (Vs. 18-23)**

The Psalmist is saying that where he finds his refuge, where he finds his stronghold, where he finds his rock on which to stand, is the knowledge that, at the end of the day, God will make it right. At the end of the day, the God of justice will prevail. At the end of the day, the wicked will be held accountable for their actions and their choices and nobody gets away with anything. Therefore we can worship our awesome God against the backdrop of a wicked, unjust, evil world because we know in our hearts, that one day, our awesome God will make it right. He will hold the wicked accountable. There will be a day of judgment and God will pour out His wrath upon those who have destroyed those whom He loves.

To the people of our culture who want to believe that God is a God of love but there will be no day of judgment, the Psalmist is clear: You better rethink that! That makes no sense; it's pure stupidity. Just because He hasn't struck someone dead today doesn't mean He doesn't know, doesn't mean He doesn't care, and doesn't mean that one day He won't hold them accountable. For those of us who have trusted Jesus as our Savior, "There is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus." It reminds us why our salvation is so important—because, apart from the salvation of Jesus, we're going to be held accountable. But there's also a reminder for those of us who have trusted Jesus as Savior: There's still an eye that sees. There's still an ear that hears. God isn't somehow indifferent

towards our sin. God isn't just shrugging His shoulders saying, "Ah, grace covers it all!" It's a reminder that our sin offends Him.

The application boils down to one simple thing: In every moment of every day, "*Do the right thing!*" It's not a lot more complicated than that. Yes, we are able to turn the other cheek. Yes, we are able to love our enemies—not because we're clueless, disconnected from the realities of the world, but because we know we have a God at the end who will make it right, who will sort it all out! His job is vengeance, not ours. So, in every moment, every day, in every circumstance, it's not complicated, "*Do the right thing!*" Is it always easy? No. Does it always work in our favor and in our culture? No. Does it sometimes lead to conflict and very difficult circumstances? Yes. But, if we honestly believe there is a God who sees all, who hears all, who knows all, then the only right response would be in every moment of every day, "*Do the right thing,*" knowing at the end of the day, God will sort it out. Right will be called right; wrong will be called wrong and the wicked will be held accountable for the wicked things they have done.

¹"*Hope Has Its Reasons: The Search to Satisfy Our Deepest Longings*" by Rebecca Pippert. (InterVarsity 1990: Chapter 4: "What Kind of God Gets Angry?")

²Czeslaw Milosz: "The Discreet Charms of Nihilism"

Our Father, we're thankful that you are a God of love, but You're also a God of vengeance. Lord, this idea that You're just a God of love and will somehow shrug your shoulders at all this wickedness and evil in the world today is silly. Just the littlest bit of careful thought leads us to the conclusion, that isn't loving at all. It's just indifference and indifference flows out of hate. Lord, because You love, You're angered by those who seek to destroy those whom You love. Lord, there is coming a day of judgment. There is coming a day of justice when all things will be made right. Lord, I pray for those of us who have trusted Jesus as Savior, that we might just be reminded how important it is everyday to do the right thing. Lord, for those that might be here this morning, who perhaps had convinced themselves there will be no accountability in the end, my prayer is that they would rethink that, that they would respond to the salvation You freely offer through Jesus and His death on the cross. In His name we pray. Amen.

But "God of Vengeance" holds the stage formidably in its own right, primarily for its forthright depiction of the love between Yankl's teenage daughter, Rifkele (Shayna Schmidt), and Manke (Melissa Weisz), one of the women who work in the brothel. The play is remarkable, too, in its nuanced depiction of Manke and her fellow prostitutes Basha (Mira Kessler) and Reyzi (Rachel Botchan). Although some may say Giles Kristian's novel, *God of Vengeance*, is a gripping tale that had me hooked from the first page. The story centers on Sigurd, a young warrior whose family is betrayed and killed by their own king. Left with a few loyal friends and a bag of hack silver, Sigurd must find a way to gather a war band capable of taking on his powerful enemies and avenge his family. Note: The codex obtained in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* with the same text is titled *Elgar'nan: The All-Father*. See also: *Elven Pantheon*, *Elves*. Long ago, when time itself was young, the only things in existence were the sun and the land. The sun, curious about the land, bowed his head close to her body, and Elgar'nan was born in the place where they touched. The sun and the land loved Elgar'nan greatly, for he was beautiful and clever. As a gift to Elgar'nan, the land brought forth great birds and beasts. *God of Vengeance* is for Phil, Pietro and Drew, with whom I rowed the *Dragon Harald Fairhair*. I know that I hung. On a wind-rocked tree. Nine whole nights, With a spear wounded, And to "in offered. Myself to myself; On that tree. Of which no one knows.