

OLD TESTAMENT WRATH

- A. Introduction: For several months we have been discussing the turmoil and chaos that is rocking our country and the world—a global pandemic and related economic issues, increasing racial and ethnic strife, growing lawlessness, rising hostility toward and abandonment of Judeo-Christian ethics and morality.
1. The Bible predicts these developments. Jesus Himself mentioned these issues, comparing them to birth pains that will indicate His return to this world is approaching. Matt 24:6-8
 - a. We are taking time to understand what is happening and why according to the Bible so that we can have peace, hope, and joy in the midst of these troubling times despite what is happening around us.
 - b. In our most recent lessons we've looked at the fact that many Christians are afraid of the Lord's soon return because they misunderstand some things about the wrath of God.
 1. There is a time of wrath associated with the second coming of Jesus, but the word wrath is never used in connection with Christians. It is used for those who reject Jesus and the salvation He has provided through His death and resurrection. Rom 5:9; I Thess 1:9-10; I Thess 5:9; etc.
 2. People mistakenly think that God's wrath is an emotional outburst at man's sin because He has finally had enough. God is certainly not pleased with sin, but His wrath is a judicial response or an administration of justice.
 3. The word wrath is used as a figure of speech for the punishment or penalty that results from breaking God's law. God's wrath (or the penalty for sin) is eternal separation from Him for all who throughout history have refused to acknowledge Jesus as Savior and Lord. II Thess 1:7-9
 2. The points we've made thus far bring up a question that needs to be answered. If the wrath of God is not Him exploding and letting people have it, then how do we explain certain events in the Old Testament where that seems to be the case? We're going to examine this issue in the next few lessons.
 - a. I've had more than one sincere Christian tell me that God seems so different in the Old Testament than in the New. And they admit that certain parts of the Old Testament disturb them greatly.
 - b. We don't have the time to look at every incident in the Old Testament where the wrath and anger of God are mentioned. But, we can cover some guidelines that will help us see that the wrath of God expressed in the Old Testament is not a contradiction of what we see in the New Testament.
- B. The apostle Paul made this statement about the Old Testament: For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (Rom 15:4, ESV).
1. If you don't get encouragement and hope from the Old Testament then you're not reading it properly. To read it properly means to read it in terms of the culture and the context in which it was written.
 - a. Everything in the Bible (Old and New Testament) was written by someone to someone about something. Real people wrote to other real people to communicate specific information for specific purposes.
 - b. To rightly interpret a verse you must take these three factors into consideration because the Scriptures can't mean something to us that they would not have meant to the first readers.
 2. The Old Testament is the portion of the Bible that been completed when Jesus came to earth the first time. It is the Bible that Jesus and His first followers read and taught from.
 - a. The Old Testament is mostly a two thousand year history of the people group through whom Jesus came into this world—the Hebrews or the Jews who inhabited the land of Israel.
 - b. Three kinds of books make up the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament: history (Genesis through Esther), poetry (Job through Song of Solomon), and prophecy (Isaiah through Malachi). The poetry and prophecy books were written during the time period covered by the history books.

3. We aren't going to do a detailed study of Israel's history, but we need several important facts about their history to help us set the context for the Old Testament.
 - a. Around 2086 BC Almighty God revealed Himself to a man named Abraham and led him to the land of Canaan (modern day Israel) to settle. His descendants eventually grew into the nation of Israel.
 1. Throughout most of their history up until just a few hundred years before Jesus was born, Israel repeatedly abandoned God to worship the idols and false gods of the people who lived around them in Canaan. They also adopted the immoral lifestyles associated with idol worship.
 2. As a result, at various times in their history the Hebrew people committed many gross sins. For example, they placed idols in God's temple at Jerusalem and worshipped them (Ezek 8). They made idols of wood and stone and worshipped them as their Creator instead of God (Jer 2:27). They sacrificed their babies to idols by burning them alive (Ps 106:37-38).
 - b. When God brought Israel into the Promised Land He warned them that if they worshipped the gods of the people around them He would allow their enemies to overrun them (Deut 4:25-28). They did not heed His warning.
 1. Over several hundred years God sent numerous prophets to warn Israel that destruction at the hands of their enemies was coming if they did not turn from their idol worship back to the Lord. Many of those warnings are recorded in the prophecy books of the Old Testament.
 2. Israel rejected God's many warnings, and, as a result, experienced the consequences of their horrific sins. They were overrun by their enemies and ultimately taken away as captives. That is the context of many of the "disturbing" verses in the Old Testament.
 3. Because people don't understand context, they misapply verses written to and about Israel when they abandoned God to worship idols. They attempt to apply them to Joe Christian who's doing his best to serve the Lord but falls short from time to time.
 - c. One of God's primary purposes in the Old Testament was to reveal Himself to Israel and the nations around Israel as God Almighty, the Only All-Powerful God. There are no other gods.
 1. When God set Abraham and his descendants apart as the ones through whom Jesus would come into the world, the entire world was polytheistic (worshipped many gods). Only Israel worshipped one God (was monotheistic), and they struggled with it.
 - A. Many Israelites got into idol worship while in bondage in Egypt and then went back to it on the way to Canaan after they were delivered from Egypt. Ezek 20:6-10; Ex 32:1-6
 - B. When Israel finally entered the land of Canaan and settled there, they repeatedly fell back to worshipping idols and all the foul practices tied to it.
 2. The Old Testament writers connected many destructive events with God, not because He caused them, but to help Israel and surrounding nations recognize that there is no other god, no other power. This is why there are so many power demonstrations directly connected to Him.
 - A. God wanted men to see that calamity came, not because the fire god was angry or the harvest god needed to be appeased, but because they were out of right relationship with Him due to idol worship.
 - B. If God had clearly revealed Himself as a loving Father to a world with many gods, Israel and the surrounding nations may have concluded that God is the love god, just one more god among many gods.
 - C. There is very little mention of the Triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) or Satan in the Old Testament for the same reason. God's message was: I am the One and Only God.
4. We must also understand that in the Hebrew language there is a verb tense that is permissive rather than causative. God is said to do what He in fact only allows. For example we read: God brought sickness among the people or God killed them.
 - a. The text does in fact say that God allowed sickness among the people. But the verb tense is similar

to an idiom in English, like the phrase, “It’s raining cats and dogs”. We who speak the language know the phrase doesn’t mean cats and dogs are falling from the sky, it means lots of rain is falling.

1. In the same way, the original readers of the Old Testament understood God did to mean God allowed. We sometimes mishear God allows as, because God didn’t stop it, He willed it.
 2. We must be clear what we mean by God allows. God allows people to sin and go to Hell. This does not mean He is for it or behind it in any way.
- b. As I said a moment ago, God warned Israel that if they worshipped the gods of the people around them they would eventually be overrun by their enemies. Deut 4:25-28
1. Just as God said, when Israel abandoned Him for idols, Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon (among other nations) at various times attacked Israel. Assyria is called the rod of God’s anger (Isa 10:5). King Shishak of Egypt is called the instrument of God’s wrath (II Chron 12:7). Babylon’s destruction of Israel is called God’s wrath (II Chron 36:15-17).
 2. When the Old Testament says Assyria and Egypt were instruments of God’s anger and national destruction was His wrath, it does not mean that God motivated or manipulated Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon. They acted out of free will.
 3. In the Old Testament God connected events to Himself—even though He was not behind them in any way—because He wanted His people to understand that troubles come when you are out of right relationship with Me.
- c. The Old Testament is a record of God’s unfolding plan to deliver humanity from sin, corruption, and death through the Cross of Christ. Remember, God’s purposes are always redemptive. He’s looking for people He can save, not destroy.
1. In order for people to appreciate the salvation Jesus provides, mankind must recognize our true condition before God—guilty of sin before a holy God and powerless to do anything about it.
 2. One of God’s primary purposes in the Old Testament is to build into human consciousness the fact that sin destroys so that men wake up to their need for a Savior before they experience the ultimate destruction that comes from sin—eternal separation from God in a place called Hell.
 3. We must understand that redemptive issues are involved. When Adam sinned and took the human race and the earth into the pigpen of sin, corruption and death, God put His Word out that the Redeemer (Jesus) would come to earth and undo the damage done. Gen 3:15
 - A. At that point He marked out the line through which Jesus would come into this world (Luke 3:23-38). The Lord progressively revealed more details, first identifying the people group through which Jesus would come (Abraham’s descendants, Gen 12:1-13), then a tribe in that group (Judah, Gen 49:10), and finally a family within the tribe (the family of David, II Sam 7:12-13).
 - B. If these people would have permanently given themselves over to idol worship they would have lost their unique identity, God’s Word would not have been fulfilled, and His plan of redemption would not have been accomplished. The destiny of the entire human race was at stake. Israel had to be cured of idol worship.
 - C. In 586 BC God allowed the Babylonian Empire to conquer Israel (Judah), destroy the city of Jerusalem and Solomon’s Temple, and removed Abraham’s descendants from their homeland for seventy years. That cured them of idol worship. They never again abandoned Almighty God to serve idols.
5. Let’s consider two example where knowing how to read the Old Testament in its historical and cultural context helps us understand the “scary” verses.
- a. Isa 45:7 seems to say that God creates evil. In this passage God is speaking to Cyrus, king of Persia, an empire that ruled over Israel at one point in its history. The Persians believed in a god of good (the god of light) and a god of evil (the god of darkness).

1. By His statement, God was making it clear to King Cyrus: “I am in complete control of everything (light, dark, good, evil, you) because I am God Almighty. There is no other god.” If we read the rest of the passage this point is clear. Isa 45:21-22
 2. When the Old Testament records God making statements such as I create evil or I make deaf ears and blind eyes (Ex 4:11), God is not saying that He does bad to people or makes them blind or sick. God is declaring His omnipotence. He is the only power. There is no other god.
 - b. Ex 20:5 is another verse used to prove that God brings bad circumstances to people. God made this statement as part of the Ten Commandments given to Israel through Moses on their way to the Promised Land. He had just told Israel that they were not to have any other gods but Him.
 1. Israel did not obey God. Once in the land of Canaan, they repeatedly worshipped false gods. Eventually, as God had warned them through His prophets, the Israelites were overrun and scattered by their enemies—first Assyria and then Babylon.
 2. The Babylonians took Israel into captivity where they remained for seventy years. As a result, their children were born in bondage in Babylon, down to the time of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren—down to the third and fourth generations,
 3. In Ex 20:5 God wasn’t declaring His plan to punish people down to the fourth generation. He was warning Israel of the consequences they would face if they worshipped idols in Canaan.
- C. Conclusion: We have more to say about God’s wrath and the Old Testament next week, but consider these thoughts as we close.
1. The Bible is progressive revelation. God has gradually revealed Himself and His plan to redeem men and women until we have the full revelation given in and through Jesus.
 - a. Heb 1:1-3—God has spoken to us by and through Jesus. He is the express image of God—the exact representation of the Father. Jesus said: If you’ve seen Me, you’ve seen the Father because I do His works and speak His words by His power in Me (John 14:9-10).
 - b. Any study of the Bible must begin with Jesus because He is the full revelation of God in human flesh. That’s why I encourage you to become a regular, systematic reader of the New Testament.
 2. We don’t start our study of God with the Old Testament. We start with the New Testament because it is a record of Jesus’ life and ministry and His crucifixion and resurrection, as well as the work of His first apostles and they went out and proclaim what they heard Him say and saw Him do
 - a. Once we have a full, clear picture of God as He is revealed in Jesus, then we filter the Old Testament through that picture.
 - b. This means that if you have ten verses from the New Testament that clearly say one thing and one verse from the Old that seems to contradict the ten, don’t throw out the ten verses. Presume that you don’t yet have full understanding of the one verse and put it on the shelf until you gain more understanding.
 3. There is no contradiction between the God of the Old and New Testament. God is not different in the Old Testament. God’s goodness, mercy, and love are found throughout the Old Testament. We sometimes have to look a little closer because they aren’t as clearly spelled out for the reasons we have stated. God is good and good means good—in the Old Testament and New. More next week!