


# A PRELUDE TO *BIBLICAL* EVANGELISM



A large, ancient tree with thick, gnarled roots growing over stone ruins. The tree's trunk is massive and textured, with roots spreading out across the ground and over the stone structures. The background shows more stone ruins and lush green foliage. The scene is set in a natural, outdoor environment.

THE FRUIT OF  
THE RIGHTEOUS IS A  
TREE OF LIFE,  
AND HE WHO IS WISE  
WINS SOULS.

PROVERBS 11:30 NASB

**PRINCIPLES  
FOR  
BIBLICAL  
*EVANGELISM*  
FOUND IN  
JOHN 4, “THE  
WOMAN AT  
THE WELL.”**

TAKE

- TAKE THE INITIATIVE! JN. 4:6-9

OFFER

- OFFER GOD’S MERCY! JN. 4:10-14

IDENTIFY

- IDENTIFY SPIRITUAL NEEDS! JN. 4:9-10

CONFRONT

- CONFRONT SIN JN! 4:16-18

REJECT



- REJECT FALSE WORSHIP! JN. 4:19-24

REVEAL

- REVEAL CHRIST! JN. 4:25-26

## “GOD, THE GREATEST LOVER”

- **LOVE** is the best known but least understood of all **God’s attributes**. Almost everyone who believes in God these days believes that He is a God of love. I have even met agnostics who are quite certain that if God exists, He must be **benevolent, compassionate, and LOVING**.
- All those things are infinitely true about God, of course, but not the way most people think. Because of the influence of modern **liberal theology**, many suppose that God’s love and goodness ultimately nullify His **righteousness, justice, and holy wrath**. They envision God as a benign heavenly grandfather—tolerant, affable, lenient, permissive, devoid of any real displeasure over sin, who without consideration of His holiness **will overlook sin and accept people as they are**.

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- **PEOPLE IN PAST GENERATIONS**, often went to the opposite extreme. They tended to think of God as **stern, demanding, cruel**, even **abusive**. They so magnified God's wrath that they virtually ignored His love. Little more than a hundred years ago, nearly all evangelistic preaching portrayed God only as a **FIERCE JUDGE** whose fury burned against sinners. History reveals that some dramatic shifts in how we think of God's love have taken place over the past **three centuries**.
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# LOVE IN THE LIGHT OF GOD'S WRATH

- Perhaps the most famous sermon ever preached in America was **JONATHAN EDWARDS'S "SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD."**
- **EDWARDS** was a pastor in *colonial Massachusetts* and a brilliant theological mind. He preached his most famous sermon as a guest speaker at a church in Enfield, Connecticut, on July 8, 1741. This sermon sparked one of the most dramatic episodes of revival in the Great Awakening. Here is an excerpt that shows the preacher's graphic and frightening bluntness in portraying God's dreadful wrath against sinners:

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- ***“O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment.”***

- The *language* and *imagery* were so vivid that many people who heard **EDWARDS** trembled, some cried out for mercy, and others fainted.
- Our generation—weaned on “**JESUS LOVES ME! THIS I KNOW**”—finds **EDWARDS’S** famous sermon shocking for an altogether different reason. Most people today would be appalled that anyone would describe God in such terrifying terms.
- But it is important that we understand the context of **EDWARDS’S** sermon. **EDWARDS** was no fiery emotionalist; he appealed dispassionately to his hearers’ sense of reason—even reading his message in a carefully controlled tone lest anyone be emotionally manipulated. His message ended with a tender appeal to flee to Christ for mercy. So, the overall tenor of that evening’s service was decidedly uplifting. **IT SIGNALLED A TIME OF GREAT REVIVAL THROUGHOUT NEW ENGLAND.**




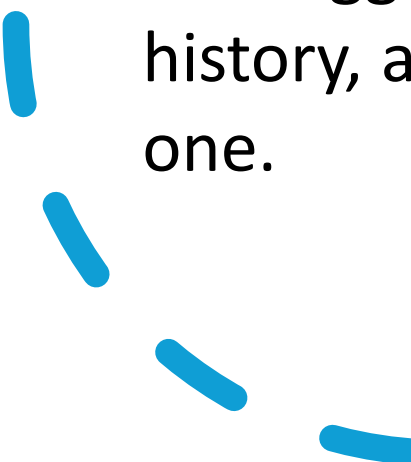
- **EDWARDS** has been falsely caricatured by some as a harsh and pitiless preacher who took great delight in *frightening* his congregations with colorful descriptions of the torments **OF HELL**. Nothing could be further from the truth. He was a warm and sensitive pastor as well as a meticulous theologian, and *he stood on solid biblical ground* when he characterized God as an angry judge. Scripture tells us, **“GOD JUDGETH THE RIGHTEOUS, AND GOD IS ANGRY WITH THE WICKED EVERY DAY”** (Psa. 7:11, KJV).
- **EDWARDS’S** sermon that night was an exposition of (Deut. 32:35–36) **“To me belongeth vengeance, and recompense; their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste. For the Lord shall judge his people”** (KJV).

- Those are biblical truths that do need to be proclaimed. And when **JONATHAN EDWARDS** preached them, he did so with a humble heart of loving compassion. A broader look at his ministry reveals that he also heavily emphasized **THE GRACE AND LOVE OF GOD**. This sermon alone does not give us *the full picture* of what his preaching was like.
- Yet **EDWARDS** was not reluctant to preach the unvarnished truth of **DIVINE WRATH**. He saw conversion as the loving work of God in the human soul, and he knew the truth of Scripture was the means God uses to convert sinners. **HE BELIEVED HIS RESPONSIBILITY AS A PREACHER WAS TO DECLARE BOTH THE POSITIVE AND THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF THAT TRUTH AS PLAINLY AS POSSIBLE.**

## **WRATH** AT THE **EXPENSE** OF GOD'S **LOVE**

- **UNFORTUNATELY**, a later generation of preachers were not so balanced and careful *in their approach to evangelism*, and *not so sound in their theology*. **CHARLES FINNEY**, an early nineteenth-century lawyer-turned-revivalist, saw conversion as a human work. **FINNEY** declared that revival could essentially be manufactured if preachers would employ the right means. He wrote:
- *“There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. It consists entirely in the right exercise of the powers of nature. It is just that, and nothing else. . . . A revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means—as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means.”*

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- **FINNEY** believed that people could be *psychologically manipulated* into responding to the gospel. One of his favorite measures for heightening emotions was preaching passionately about the fiery threats of divine vengeance. By this he sought to *intimidate people* into responding to the gospel. Whereas **EDWARDS** had looked to the Holy Spirit to use the truth of Scripture to convert sinners, **FINNEY** believed it was the preacher's task to *evoke* the desirable response—through *artful persuasion, browbeating, manipulation*, or whatever means possible. He found that terrorizing people was a very effective method of arousing a response, and his repertoire was filled with sermons designed to heighten the fears of unbelievers. **DOES THIS APPROACH RING A BELL?**

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- **PREACHERS** who adopted **FINNEY'S** methods often carried them to **preposterous extremes**. Preaching about **divine wrath** was often theatrical. And the subject of God's wrath against sin began to be preached **TO THE EXCLUSION OF GOD'S LOVE**. All this had a very profound impact on the popular perception of God.
  - The **typical Christian** of the **mid-1800s** would have been scandalized by the suggestion that God loves sinners. But as is so often the case in history, an obvious error ends up being remedied by an even greater one.
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# LOVE AT THE EXPENSE OF GOD'S WRATH

- With the rise of *liberal theology*, the pendulum swung hard in the opposite direction. **LIBERALISM** (sometimes called modernism) was a corruption of Christianity, based on a wholesale **DENIAL OF THE AUTHORITY AND INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE**. It was a growing trend throughout the nineteenth century, influenced strongly by trends in *German theology*.
- While retaining some of the moral teachings of Christianity, *liberalism* attacked the historic foundations of the faith. *Liberals* denied the *deity of Christ*, the *historicity of the Bible*, and the *uniqueness of the Christian faith*. Instead, they proclaimed the brotherhood of all humanity under the fatherhood of God—and consequently insisted that **GOD'S ONLY ATTITUDE TOWARD HUMANITY WAS PURE LOVE**. In fact, the overarching interpretive principle for liberals became the **THEME OF LOVE**. **IF A PASSAGE DIDN'T REFLECT THEIR DEFINITION OF DIVINE LOVE, IT WAS DISALLOWED AS SCRIPTURE.**

- In the early part of the *twentieth* century, **LIBERALISM** took mainline Protestant churches by storm.
- **EVANGELICALISM**, which had dominated *Protestant America* since the days of the founding fathers, was virtually driven out of denominational schools and churches. In a few decades, **LIBERALISM VIRTUALLY DESTROYED THE LARGEST PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS IN AMERICA AND EUROPE.**

## LOVE RENDERED MEANINGLESS

- **SADLY**, what was true of *liberalism* then is all too true of *evangelicalism* today. **WE HAVE LOST THE REALITY OF GOD'S WRATH**. We have disregarded His hatred for sin. The God most evangelicals now describe is *all-loving* and not at all *angry*. We have forgotten that ***“it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God”*** (Heb. 10:31). **WE DO NOT BELIEVE IN THAT KIND OF GOD ANYMORE.**
- Ironically, this overemphasis on divine beneficence actually works against a sound understanding of God's love. Some theologians are so bent on this perception of God as *all love* that when things go wrong, they see it as evidence that God can't really control everything. **They believe if God is truly loving, He can't be fully sovereign. THIS VIEW MAKES GOD INTO A VICTIM OF EVIL.**



- Multitudes have embraced the disastrous idea that ***God is impotent to deal with evil***. They believe He is kindly but feeble, or perhaps aloof, or simply unconcerned about human wickedness. Is it any wonder that people with such a concept of God ***defy His holiness, take His love for granted, and presume on His grace and mercy?*** **CERTAINLY NO ONE WOULD FEAR A DEITY LIKE THAT.**
- ***YET SCRIPTURE*** tells us repeatedly that ***FEAR OF GOD*** is the very foundation of true wisdom (***Job 28:28; Psa. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; 15:33; Mic. 6:9***). People often try to explain the sense of those verses away by saying that the ***“FEAR”*** called for is a devout sense of awe and reverence. Certainly, the fear of God includes ***AWE*** and ***REVERENCE***, but it does not ***EXCLUDE*** literal ***HOLY TERROR***.
- ***“It is the Lord of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, and He shall be your dread”*** (Isaiah 8:13).

# LOVE IN HARMONY WITH GOD'S OTHER ATTRIBUTES

- WE MUST RECAPTURE SOME OF THE **HOLY TERROR** THAT COMES WITH A **RIGHT UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S RIGHTEOUS ANGER.**
- We need to remember that God's wrath does burn *against impenitent sinners* (Psa. 38:1–3). That reality is the very thing that makes **HIS LOVE SO AMAZING.**
- We must therefore **proclaim these truths** with the same sense of conviction and fervency we employ when we declare **the love of God**. It is only against the backdrop of **DIVINE WRATH** that the full significance of **GOD'S LOVE** can be truly understood. That is precisely the message of the cross of Jesus Christ. **AFTER ALL, IT WAS ON THE CROSS THAT GOD'S LOVE AND HIS WRATH CONVERGED** IN ALL THEIR MAJESTIC FULLNESS.

- Both **GOD'S WRATH** and **HIS LOVE** work to the same ultimate end—**HIS GLORY**. God is *glorified* in the **condemnation of the wicked**, and He is *glorified in the salvation of His people*. The expression of His wrath and the expression of His love *are both necessary to display His full glory*.
- **SINCE HIS GLORY IS THE GREAT DESIGN OF HIS ETERNAL PLAN**, and since all that He has revealed about Himself is essential to His glory, *we must not ignore any aspect of His character*. **WE CANNOT MAGNIFY HIS LOVE TO THE EXCLUSION OF HIS OTHER ATTRIBUTES**.
- Nevertheless, those who truly know God will testify that the deepest spiritual delights are derived from the knowledge of His love. His love is what drew us to Him in the first place: ***“We love, because He first loved us”*** (1 John 4:19). **HIS LOVE**—certainly not anything worthy in us—**IS THE REASON HE SAVED US AND BESTOWED ON US SUCH RICH SPIRITUAL PRIVILEGES:**

- *“But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:4–6).*
- The right approach is to study **GOD’S LOVE** within its biblical context, and then you will discover **“GOD IS THE GREATEST LOVER.”**

A Valentine  
From God

For God so lo **V** ed the world,  
That He g **A** ve  
his on **L** y  
Begott **E** n  
So **N**  
**T** hat whosoever  
Believeth **I** n Him  
Should **N** ot perish,  
But have **E** verlasting life.