

"The Wrath of the Lamb"

We have a lot we hope to do at the end of the service today so I am going to try to speak adequately but briefly about a difficult truth. One of the most difficult issues for modern people considering faith in Jesus is the topic of the wrath of God. In this message we're coming back to **Revelation 6** to look at the issue of the wrath of the Lamb. Did you notice that phrase at the end of **verse 16**? In the Bible when you think of Jesus as the Lamb of God the emphasis is on his sacrifice. That's the emphasis in Revelation 5. As the Lamb of God, he was slain, sacrificed, in love he has ransomed, saved people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. What the phrase "*the wrath of the lamb*" stresses is that while God is a God of love and Jesus *is* a loving and sacrificial Savior His wrath is also a reality.

I. THE WRATH OF GOD AND THE LAMB IS REAL AND WE HAVE TO TAKE IT SERIOUSLY.

When **Revelation 6:17** talks about the great day of the *wrath* of God and of Jesus it is not surfacing an idea foreign to the rest of the Bible. The Bible and Jesus have a lot to say about God's wrath.

But...

A. What is the wrath of God and of the Lamb?

Have you ever heard the statement, "*Tell me about the God you don't believe in, maybe I don't believe in him either*"? It makes a point. It applies to the wrath of God. If you are a part of our church I hope you are sharing your faith. If you do, it is highly likely that you will sooner or later run into someone who is incensed over the idea that the Bible talks about a God of wrath who judges sinners. The first thing we should do in situations like that is to ask that person: "*What do you think the Bible says about the wrath of God? What do you mean by the wrath of God?*" You will often find people think things the Bible does *not* teach and you do *not* believe.

Someone will say something like: "*I had an alcoholic father who would have impulsive, abusive, angry outbursts. I can't believe God is like that and if God is an angry bully I don't want a relationship with a God like that!*" Well I wouldn't either. God is not like that.

When we say the wrath of God is real and we have to take it seriously we are not talking about wrath as an unpredictable, angry, emotional outburst of a cruel and unfair God - that is not what the Bible teaches. The same Bible that tell us about the wrath of teaches us that God is good and loving and holy and true. You may struggle to understand how a God who is good and loving can also have a wrath that is perfect and just, but that is what Jesus taught, the Bible says, and Christians believe. Even in all the drama of Revelation God's wrath is *not* an impulsive, unjust, over-reaction.

So what is God's wrath? *God's wrath is God's just, reasonable, and measured indignation over the harmful, arrogant, rebellion of sinful people who have rejected grace.* God's wrath is not cruelty but it is justice with holy indignation. The same God who loves passionately and sacrificially hates sin, has holy wrath and brings just judgment.

B. The reason some modern people reject God's wrath is not rational, it is cultural.

There is no rational reason to assume that a perfectly holy God would not as an attribute of his perfection have an indignant hatred of sin and the settled resolved to judge sin justly. If you are tempted to reject what the Bible and Jesus teach about the wrath of God consider whether your perspective is just narrow and cultural.

When I was teaching at Reformed Theological Seminary one year we had a guest speak named Miroslav Volf. I didn't know much about him at the time but discovered he is a Croation theologian who is now teaching at Yale. He witnessed war in the Balkins when a third of his country was overrun and occupied by Serbian forces. He writes alot about war and violence and forgiveness. One of his interesting contributions is he says that the modern American rejection of the doctrine of God's wrath and judgment is really a very narrow, privilidged, suburban, middle-class western cultural phenomena that flourishes in places where people have not had to suffer profound evil. Interestingly he when people have had their town and villages laid waste, women raped - and people massacred cruelly it's usually only when you have a robust belief in God's wrath and judgment that people can be persuaded to let go of their own vengeance and leave payback to God. (Quoted by Keller in *The Reason for God.*) He points out in many cultures the doctrine of God's wrath and judgment is not an objection or a problem but a solution and a comfort. It's sobering and serious but necessary that God hates and judges evil justly in the end.

No matter how strongly we may feel something sometimes we are ourselves just unable or unwilling to rise above our own cultural bias.

C.S. Lewis wrote an essay once titled *God in the Dock*. In the British court system, the dock is where the person accused of a crime stands to face judgment. Lewis said that for most of history and in most cultures people approached God (or the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. But for modern Western people the roles are reversed. We think we are the judge and God is the accused. We will be tolerant of God if he can explain himself to our satisfaction but we think of ourselves as if we are the judge and God is on trial! What Revelation is showing us is that if we think we are in a position to judge God we've got it backwards. We need to question our perspective.

The wrath of God is real and we need to take it seriously. And what Revelation 6 specifically shows us is that...

II. THE WRATH OF GOD IS BEING RESTRAINED AT THE PRESENT BUT IT WILL BE REVEALED IN THE END.

A. The wrath of God is actually being held back right now.

Look at **Revelation 6:9-11**. John sees a vision of followers of Jesus, their souls are under the altar. Sure this is highly symbolic but it telling us that these people in heaven - their lives are seen by God as a sacrifice of devotion given to him. It says they have been *slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne*. They were killed - their blood shed not just unjustly but because of their commitment to him! In **verse 10** he hears them cry out with a loud voice, *“O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”* God is not only being provoked by the sins of his enemies killing his people but he is also being prayerfully petitioned to bring judgement and justice by his servants and children. But how does God respond? With Patience! **Verse 11** says, *Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been*. On the one hand there is the tenderness of God toward these souls. He gives them the white robe and tells them to rest. But on the other hand there is God's patience toward his enemies. He is saying, “Not yet”. This is not an unjust God with a hair-trigger temper.

Psalm 86:15 *But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.* The apostle

Peter also talks about God's patience. **2 Peter 3:9** *The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.* Just as there is a full number of people who will lose their lives because of faith in Jesus there is a full number of people who are going to experience salvation through repentance and faith. The God who is sovereign and holy and true is waiting for his perfect plan to be complete. Until then he restrains his wrath.

God's wrath is being graciously restrained in this present age. But,
B. God's wrath will be powerfully revealed in the end.

That's what is pictured when the sixth seal is opened. **Revelation 6:12-13** *When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The Greek words for star includes any heavenly bodies seen in the sky at night and so could include meteors and asteroids. **Verse 14,** *The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.**

The point Revelation makes is that the world will come apart like this is because God's wrath will be revealed at last. That comes out in **verses 15-17,** *Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, 16 calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, 17 for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand.* The important thing with a passage like this is not to spin out some speculative theory as to how all this will unfold really but to take to heart the truth that this day is coming!

No matter how strongly we may think or feel something sometimes what we need is nothing less than a complete change of perspective. Steven Covey tells the story of a friend of his travelling in Europe. She found herself worn out from her trip with time to kill in London's Heathrow Airport. So she bought a cup of coffee and package of cookies struggled with her luggage to a table and started reading a newspaper. She was reading her paper when she became aware of someone else at the table and was shocked because he was helping himself to her cookies. He was a well-dressed young man and it

seemed wierd. She didn't want to make scene, so she just reached over and took a cookie herself - sort of staking her claim. A minute passed and the guy did it again. He was just helping himself. Pretty soon they were down to the last cookie and she was pretty angry but still didn't know what to do. Then, the young man takes the last cookie, breaks it in two and pushes half of it across to her, eats the other half and leaves. A little later when they called for her plane to begin boarding she was still fuming. But when she opened her purse to get her boarding pass she discovered her package of cookies in her purse unopened. She had been eating his cookies not the other way around. Suddenly she went from being unbelievably outraged to incredibly embarrassed.

When I read in **Revelation 6:16**, where people are calling for the mountains and rocks to hide them from the wrath of the Lamb, I wonder if part of the terror is that they never took God's wrath seriously - they never thought they would face God's wrath. We're like people who are angry at God because we think he's unfairly eating our cookies. But we've got it backwards. In the illustration it's just a trivial offense but what if the offense is massive? What if we are all indignant at the injustices of the world and the ugliness we see in others but the truth is we are deeply involved with it, complicit in it, and guilty of it but blind to it. That is what the Bible says is true of us. What we face is not a moment of embarrassment but the revelation of God's wrath. When that happens who can stand? *Who can stand?*

Conclusion

There is a surprising and positive answer to that question given in the next chapter of Revelation. **Revelation 7:9-10** *After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"*

Who can stand? A great multitude of all kinds of people who are forgiven and celebrating because this is what they know and believe: "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" To say salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb means it only comes *from* God as a gift of His grace. Some of you think that God couldn't love you. Or he could *maybe* love some future, cleaned up, dressed up version of you. The truth is He loves you before you ever start to clean yourself up. He loves you in the mess - as you are.

Salvation does not belong to the adequate the competent and the righteous but to God and He gives it even to the foul-ups, the broken, and the deeply sinful who hunger for it and put their faith in Jesus. Later in **Revelation 7** it says those who *stand* before God's throne are those who have *washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb*. That's a picture of forgiveness and being covered, clothed, in the beauty and goodness of the life of Jesus. When you quit fighting God, or trying to earn his approval and humbly admit you need his grace, when in that kind of honest humility you turn to Jesus and trust Him as your Savior He saves you and you can stand before him in a state of grace. That frees you from fear and from pretending.

If there was or is no wrath or judgment from which we needed to be saved than the sacrifice and suffering of Jesus doesn't really make much sense. Only when you see that Jesus had to take the penalty for you to save you can you appreciate how much he loves you and what he has done for you. You can stand because he suffered for you. You can be sheltered in him because he paid it all for you. That's the breathtaking beauty and power of the gospel that gives you a place to stand in love and grace and fills you with the truth that can inspire and motivate and sustain a life of following Jesus and loving him.

Amen.