

SURVIVING THE HOLOCAUST

Isaiah 63:1-6; 64:1-9

Who is this coming from Edom, from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson? Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forward in the greatness of his strength? “It is I, proclaiming victory, mighty to save.” Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress? “I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing. It was for me the day of vengeance; the year for me to redeem had come. I looked, but there was no one to help, I was appalled that no one gave support; so my own arm achieved salvation for me, and my own wrath sustained me. I trampled the nations in my anger; in my wrath I made them drunk and poured their blood on the ground.”... Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins. Yet you, LORD, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all your people.

MESSAGE:

What is the biggest problem we have in our country today? Some would say that illegal drugs are our biggest problem. Others would say illegal immigration. Others would say crime, and still others, poverty. Some would say we have too much government, and others that we don't have enough government. But none of these is our biggest problem: they are only symptoms of our biggest problem.

Our biggest problem is sin—which has always been our biggest problem. Sin cripples our intellects, perverts our desires, destroys our bodies, wrecks families, undermines trust and breeds misery. Finally, it kills us.

Because it does such horrific damage to His children, God is enraged over our sin. And God's wrath it is a fearful thing: we need to be aware of it, as today's Old Testament lesson makes clear. *“Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forward in greatness of his strength? ‘It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save. Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress? ‘I have trodden the winepress alone; from the*

nations no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing. For the day of vengeance was in my heart...”

God is furious over our sin and there is a limit to His patience. God’s first anointed king of Israel, Saul the Benjamite, exceeded that limit and God sent a demon to torment him which drove him insane and led him to suicide. Judas Iscariot exceeded it: he betrayed the Son of God for 20 pieces of silver and ended up hanging himself. Both of these miserable, lost creatures discovered too late that there is a limit to God’s patience.

The prophet Isaiah repeatedly warned the children of Israel that they were coming perilously close to exceeding that limit. He cried out: *“Why, O LORD, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so that we do not revere you?”*

These words contain one of the scariest doctrines in the Bible. It is called “divine obduration” and it refers to the fact that when people continue to harden their hearts toward God, at some point God will “second their motion” and increase the hardening. Pharaoh hardened his heart against Moses and God four times and from then on, God hardened Pharaoh’s heart even further.

What were the sins of the Israelites that had provoked God to harden their hearts further—past the point of repentance? Principally there were four, each one following the other like night follows day. First of all they transgressed God’s moral law. Second, they refused to repent. Third, they ceased worshipping God in the way He had provided. And fourth, they turned to pagan idols.

This is the classic path to apostasy, the loss of faith, and there are two ways it can lead us down the path to destruction. One way is to tempt us to become addicted to some particular sin. The sin makes us feel guilty but we just can’t give it up. Since going to church increases our guilt, we start drawing away from church. Initially, that makes us feel better since we can now enjoy our sin without feeling so guilty. Pretty soon we have drawn completely away from church and have happily embraced our sin.

At this point our sin has become our idol because it is more important to us than our relationship with God. **“Our** Father” doesn’t seem like **our** Father anymore. Then God takes over and hardens our heart even further, and soon we are cheerfully walking down the path which seems right to us, but whose end is destruction. We feel good about ourselves and we are headed straight for hell. And Satan crows: *“Mission accomplished!”*

The second way is more subtle but equally insidious. It begins when we begin to question the idea that God has wrath over sin. We begin to think of God more like a kindly grandfather who is mildly irritated by our sins rather a father who is angered by them. Our tolerant, permissive society encourages this kind of thinking, calling it “tolerant” and “non-judgmental.” We end up reconstructing God in our own imaginations as a tolerant and non-judgmental God. Our complacency is reinforced when it seems as if we are getting away with our sins. We sin and yet we survive; we regularly break God’s commandments in our thoughts and words and actions, yet we don’t suffer. We become convinced that

God isn't bothered all that much by sin since He allows so much of it to go on—seemingly unpunished.

We can even become like the scoffers Peter describes who sarcastically ask: *"Where is this God of yours and where is the 'coming' he promised?"* And ever so gradually—almost unconsciously—our faith becomes a dim candle: we tell ourselves that we still have faith—it just doesn't have much to do with our daily lives. But the fact that God does not punish us immediately for our sins does not mean that he doesn't take them seriously. Make no mistake: **God hates sin.** He hates **OUR sin.**

If we intentionally persist in sinning after we are saved and harden our hearts toward repentance in order to avoid feeling guilty—at some point we will find that we are unable to repent. At that point, we are lost and become one of those described in the *Book of Hebrews*, *"who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age" yet who "fall away" and can never "be brought back to repentance."* Who return to their sins again and again like a dog returns to its vomit.

Isaiah saw it coming among the Israelites. He asks, *"How can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf and like the wind our sins sweep us away."* God's judgment finally fell on them and He delivered them into the hands of their enemies. They lost their country, their city, their temple and their freedom. Those were the Israelites, but how about us?

Do we ignore God's moral law and then "forget" to repent? Do we spend the Sabbath worshipping God—or football? And if the latter, does it even occur to us that we are sinning? When we talk about other people do we build them up or tear them down? If the latter, do we repent—or console ourselves with the thought that we were only telling the truth about them anyway. In our conversations, do we make a point of sticking scrupulously to the truth or do we dissemble for the sake of vanity or simple convenience or to avoid an argument? Do we keep our home holy, or do we allow blasphemy and pornography to come in under the guise of entertainment? Do we make prayer a staple of our daily lives—the most important part of our day—or do we find ourselves just too busy to make time for it? Do we make it a point to always be in church on Sunday—or do we let a little bad weather give us an excuse to stay home?

If the answer to any or all of these questions is "Yes," then how are we any different from the immoral, unrepentant, idolatrous and prayerless children of Israel, whose sin provoked God to harden their hearts unto the destruction of their nation? The truth is, our country has approached the limits of God's patience. Unless there is a massive revival of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ in this country, there is a holocaust coming and all we can do is cherish the desperate hope that God's wrath will somehow not fall on us.

During the decline of faith and the rise of paganism in Old Testament Israel, God preserved what He called a "faithful remnant"—a small group of Israelites who continued to worship Him rather than pagan idols. When Elijah despaired over the faithlessness of the Israelites, God told him, "Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees

have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.” For the sake of a faithful remnant, God withheld the thermonuclear holocaust of His wrath, the maelstrom of his vengeance—for a time.

Now we are that remnant and we need to pray with all our hearts and souls and minds and strength for God to stay the holocaust. If not for ourselves, then at least for the sake of our children and grandchildren and their children. We need to be in constant prayer that God will mitigate His wrath for the sake of the One who came to bear it in our place.

In six agonizing hours on the cross, Jesus endured all the punishment for our sins—all the torments of eternal hell. Like a lightning rod, the cross drew down God’s wrath upon Him, so that we would not be burned to a crisp. The direct result of this was what Isaiah pleaded for when he cried out, *“O LORD, do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are your people.”* God replied, *“I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more.”* Unimaginable, yet true!

Where sin abounds, God’s grace can superabound! God’s amazing love for each one of us has led him to forgive all our sins—even those we have not yet committed. But the price He has put upon his forgiveness is that we repent of them. When we fail to repent—by choice or default—our hearts harden and we trample our faith in the dust.

God promised Abraham that He would spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake ten righteous people who lived there. They were not to be found; there was no faithful remnant. And the fire that rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah was nothing compared with holocaust that awaits those who refuse to repent.

And make no mistake, our country is now in the same league as Sodom and Gomorrah. We are the remnant. Let us pray for our country.

Amen.