

Wrath to Riches

[Ephesians 2:1-10](#)

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Today, we address the ancient concern, about who God is and who God wants us to be. Is God a God of wrath--or a God of grace? Let us pray together. So, by the power of your word through Jesus Christ and the words of the apostles, may you speak to us of ancient times, of creation, of your goodness and love to us. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sometimes, it is the children who discern the possibility of the real nature of what is going on, whether there is grace or whether there is wrath at work. A guest came to an Arizona Sunday School gathering of children as a man who was brought in to regale his experiences of the grace of God for many times that he had been brought through difficult places. He was there to tell his harrowing stories of how God had intervened. He told how he was in New Orleans at the time of Katrina and had escaped and helped some people. He was in Sri Lanka during the tsunami and had escaped that with helping some people, and he was in Oklahoma during a tornado and escaped that in helping some people. Hearing all of this tremendous intervention of God, one 10-year-old boy spoke up toward the end of his presentation and said, "Do you plan to stay in Tucson long?"

Children unfortunately suffer the wrath of humanity, particularly during war. UNICEF estimated that one-third of those killed in the recent struggle between Israel and Hezbollah were children; one-half of those displaced were children.

Children are the innocent victims of the wrath of human beings. Sometimes we blame God for our wrath. There is a great historic tension that exists among all religions, of whether God is a God of love and grace or God is a God of wrath, or is God both--somehow, two sides of the same coin.

You've seen the bumper sticker "Jesus is coming back, and he's angry," or the sign on the highway, "Don't Make Me Come Down There, God." The message is that underneath all that kindness of God, God is just waiting to deal with us in a wrathful way. Jonathan Edwards was probably the most noteworthy historic figure on the wrath of God, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God;" in fact, he had several sermons on the wrath of God. It was a theme in his life, and he said this: "When those that are continuing to sin shall have filled up the full measure of their sin, then wrath will come upon them to the uttermost. The wrath of God will be poured out like fire. It will come forth not only in anger, but in the fierceness of His anger, He will execute wrath with power." For Jonathan Edwards, it was the wrath of God that convinced people that they needed to respond to the grace of God.

Even as late as yesterday, the Pope has been under criticism for his statement that "Islam teaches that God is a God of violence and wrath." But I would submit that Christianity, Judaism and Islam all have some common threads, where many of our people in those traditions and patterns have believed, at one time or another, in a God of wrath.

This word "wrath" in the book of Ephesians is about the indignation that someone suffers when their authority is challenged--I don't like to be challenged; I get angry. We had that view of God that when God is challenged, God gets angry. That image is one who gets swollen and reddened, puffed up, angry and full of rage. That word gives us an image of God that's not very pleasant. It's connected with another word that's often exploited with the image of a volcano, "thumos," which is the wrath that is building up inside and "orge," which is this word which is the wrath that is blowing up all over the place.

What Paul spoke to, I believe, is the reality in his context of ministry among the Ephesians: the Greeks understood that the gods were gods of wrath. Wrath was a common feature of gods and the humanity of people that the gods interacted with. The Roman gods were into punitive judgment -- that, if you were

sick or you were suffering, or you lost a war, or you were experiencing catastrophe, that the gods were angry with you. Wrath in pagan religions reflects a character of God that is full of wrath, and needs to be placated and appeased. The gods are snorting mad, according to the Old Testament perspective of the pagan gods. In the New Testament, this reflection is that human beings can become snorting mad like the gods.

And we are children of angry generations. We bring the wrath upon ourselves, but we often blame God for it. When we cannot make things right or sanctify ourselves, we blame God for the problem that we're in. When things become difficult or a mess, we say God is the one who is causing the trouble. But, contrary to that pagan view of the nature of God, the New Testament brings us clearly, over and over again, a distinctive difference. It is reflective of the Old Testament nature of God, that God is slow to anger, abundant in mercy, patient, full of loving kindness, desires peace, does not want to bring about war, and that the wrath of God happens when people refuse to engage the grace and love of God.

God sets up the world in such a way that we have a choice to make as human beings: we can either embrace God in grace and love, or we can turn away. And, if we turn away, there is only one thing left for us, and that is wrath. Sometimes the Old Testament prophets identified that as the wrath of God, but it is clear in the New Testament that wrath is the wrath as a result of human beings refusing to engage a gracious God. When 9/11 happened, there were some, even in the church, who declared that God had allowed the attacks to happen as an act of judgment against America for doing the wrong things. A theology of a God of wrath that passes judgment on people who don't do the right things permeated some of those conversations. But, let us remember that the wrath came not because God had implemented it but because human beings became people in nations who were angry and vindictive, and took out terrible terroristic tactics on other human beings.

Ephesians, chapter 2, affirms the distinctiveness in the wrath of God and the grace of God. Paul says, "You were dead in your sins. You lived in sins and trespasses, you followed the pattern of the world, you followed the prince of the air, you had the spirit of disobedience." All of us have lived this way in the past, even those who walked with Jesus. In the present, we have come out of that lifestyle of wrath. We are, as Paul says, by nature children of wrath; but God... but God is not that way. God is rich in mercy. God shows us the riches of an immeasurable abundance of grace, out of God's great love for us: even when we were dead we were made alive through Jesus Christ. You see the emphasis? Human beings, you are people of wrath, but God is a god of rich grace and mercy.

Calvin said it this way about Ephesians 2:3 "We are born with sin as serpents bring their venom from the womb." He had a knack with words. There is a twofold nature of humanity -- that God created us good, but we turn away from God, and we become children of wrath. We are redeemed by the infused incarnate and good nature of Jesus Christ; we are not left alone to continue in that pattern of life. Tertullian, one of the church fathers, in his proclamation against the Greek heresy of Marcionism, noticed that, as a Jew, Paul had been one of the children of unbelief in whom the Devil was at work, especially when he persecuted the church and the Christ of the Creator. On his account of Ephesians 2:3, he says: "We were by nature children of wrath," but he says "by nature" so that a heretic could not argue that it was the Lord who created evil. We create the grounds for the Creator's wrath ourselves: we are the children of wrath. Paul also understood, when he looked back over his life, that he, as a person of wrath and vindictiveness, persecuted the church... threw people into prison... had them beat up and killed... stoned. He perpetuated the wrath. He probably attached his perpetuation of that to the wrath of God, but God would not take ownership for that. God is a God of grace; and, when Paul came to understand that, he gave up that life of retribution, and he became a man of mercy and grace.

Without God, we are by nature children of wrath: born in a world of wrath...into families of wrath...nurtured in neighborhoods of wrath... trained in relationships of wrath. Without God, wrath is the natural order of humanity. And, where does wrath come from? Wrath comes from the original issue of sin. It is the result of every person seeing the world from his narrow point of view and passing judgment on everybody else around them: "I have become the one who knows good and evil. I will be the judge." And, when we all do that, we develop a whole world of mutual wrath. Wrath is not so much what God does to us but what we do to each other. God does allow it to happen because God has created us as people who can choose our own way. God is not going to intervene and stop the wrath because human beings can make it

happen. Sometimes we blame God for the stupidity of humanity that refuses to engage grace. Without the intervening grace of God, we would die; we would be annihilated in the wrath of mutual human destruction.

This can come home to a very real pattern of life in our everyday relationships. I was a friend to a woman who loved to cook. She loved to hang out in the church kitchen. She loved to serve people, and she loved to make great food. But when someone crossed her in the kitchen, look out; you experienced the wrath of a woman in a kitchen--harsh words, terrible tones, and mean looks. People didn't want to be within a mile of that kind of wrath. I asked her once, during a moment when she was a little more calm and serene: "Why do you get so hurtful when someone crosses you in the kitchen?" She said, "Well, no one's ever asked me that before. I don't know why. I can't figure it out. I really don't want to be that way. I know it's not right. I really try to be nice, but something within me takes over when something goes wrong, and I flip into a rage. And sometimes it feels so good when I get angry, I kind of enjoy it. I think my Mom was that way." Children of wrath, we have choices to make every day when we are confronted with a God of mercy. Do we live into the mercy, or do we reject that and live into our pattern of wrath? It's the responsibility of personal choice. Do we do what comes natural to us, and that is let our emotions fly and our desires go wild, which creates all sorts of dissidence? Or do we live into the presence and grace of God in Jesus Christ, who is rich in mercy, is not a person of wrath, gives the very nature and identity of who God is in love, kindness, generosity, and blessing? God is a god of love, not a god of wrath. We must get this theology clear: it will not leave this world. We will deal with it daily. Do not blame the wrath of what's going on in the world on God; it is the result of human choice stacked up over generations and generations. And God is trying to put a stop to it in Jesus Christ. God loves us, is merciful to us, makes us alive in Christ, saves us by grace, raises us up with Christ into a high place so we can see the best in the future of all that God wants us to do--immeasurably more than we can possibly ask or imagine. We can't do this kind of life by ourselves. Only the grace of God in Jesus Christ can come to us and change us.

When we embrace this grace, we have a couple of temptations, however, as followers. One is that we believe that God may be merciful to us and wrathful to our enemies. We kind of like that one. Ron White is here as a scholar regarding the life of Abraham Lincoln and his faith. He has noted several times recently, in Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, that Lincoln refused to do what was being preached from almost every pulpit in the North and the South, and that is: God will get our enemies. Lincoln said, "No. Our demand is not that God become one on our side but that we get on God's side." To declare God that God is a god of wrath was what his enemies and his followers wanted Lincoln to do. But Lincoln refused. The Almighty has his own purposes, and he understood God as a god of grace.

The second temptation is: "Well, God is so good that God wants everyone to be safe, secure, healthy, wealthy, and wise. There is no power of wrath in the world; God is going to make everything better. God wants only success." That happens to be a very popular pattern being preached in churches around the country today, the prosperity gospel: that God is so good that God will not allow wrath or hurt to be in your life. You will be successful if you follow God; you will become wealthy. This is also not true. Wrath has an impact. While God is working graciously in our lives, the wrath of people and humanity over the generations also has an impact. The prosperity theology, as noted in Time magazine, even this past week, will not take over, because it is not about the monetary generosity of God; it is about God's gracious generosity. And, by the way, the message in that is that, if you believe in a gracious God who is generous, you will become a gracious person who is generous. God cares for the poor; you will become a person who cares for the poor. God is rich in mercy and love and generosity. God's grace will effect change in our lives.

John Wesley, that wonderful reformer in church history who started the Methodist movement, saw the poor people in urban, industrialized England and noticed that the church was ignoring them. Wesley believed that God loved them; God would be gracious to them. And he preached that to them; he encouraged them to start changing their life pattern because of the grace of Jesus Christ. They were encouraged to give a penny a day to the poor--even those who were poor themselves. What happened was that in the Wesleyan movement, the Methodists became wealthy people. If you wonder why, in the South, all those Methodists are driving Cadillacs, it's because Wesley preached the Gospel to the poor. He told them to "make money, save money, and give money." You notice the words "spend money" aren't there.

God is rich in mercy because God wants us to invest generously in those who need grace. God wants to reach you and love you. God wants to move in your life. God is not a god of wrath. God wants to relieve you of being a child of the wrath of generations and help you to be a child of grace. God is not willing that any should perish but that every one should have this gracious life. In Jesus Christ, we are each confronted with the question today: "Do you turn to the living God who is gracious, or do you turn away and decide to live life in wrath?" That's the choice. Children are often the innocent victims of human wrath. Our children need to be the recipients of mercy because the parents, and the leaders, and the grandparents are connected to the God of mercy. May that be the way God's Spirit moves among us--that we would not be children of wrath, but that we would experience the profound wealth of God's grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. Amen.