

“God’s Self-limiting Wrath”

Isaiah 57:16

June 4, 2020

SERMON 1918

by Michael David Henson

Our sermon text is from Isaiah 57:16, “For I will not contend forever, Nor will I always be angry; For the spirit would fail before Me, And the souls which I have made.”

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Triune God tells Moses on Mt. Sinai, as recorded in the book of Leviticus, “Speak to all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy’” (19:2). That verse is actually the first direct Scriptural reference which says that God is holy. Not once in the book of Genesis is God said to be holy. Neither with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac or Jacob is God described as holy, until we get to Moses. The first time the word, holy, is found in the Scriptures is an indirect reference to God’s holiness. In Exodus 3, Moses is told to take off his sandals at the burning bush, because the place upon which he is standing is holy ground. We can rightly assume that the ground is holy, because of the presence of a holy God, but the text doesn’t actually say that.

I’m not saying that God isn’t holy. The Triune God is truly holy. The Prophet Isaiah in around 740 B.C. received a vision of the Lord sitting on His heavenly throne. The seraphim cried out, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!” (Isaiah 6:3). My point is that if the Exodus is dated at about 1450 BC, then we don’t have a Scriptural reference which explicitly says that God is holy for the first 2,500 years of human existence! I can only assume that they all knew it and it didn’t have to be said. What I am saying is that God’s holiness is not the most important thing God wants us to know.

After Isaiah had this heavenly vision of our holy, holy, holy God, he freaks out in holy fear saying, “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isaiah 6:5-8). The response of God’s people to the holiness of God is never to stand up and sing a praise song. The response is always a recognition of sin and fear of God’s anger. The vision at the beginning of the book of Isaiah (1:4) connects the righteous anger of the holy God with the sinful disobedience of people. Verse 4 says, “Alas, sinful nation, A people laden with iniquity, A brood of evildoers, Children who are corrupters! They have forsaken the Lord, They have provoked to anger The Holy One of Israel, They have turned away backward.”

Thankfully, for Isaiah, a remedy is provided for his sinful condition. Isaiah 6:6-7 says, “Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. ⁷And he touched my mouth with it, and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; Your iniquity is taken away, And your sin purged.’” The forgiveness of sins is what is needed, so that we can stand in the presence of the Holy One of Israel.

This brings us to today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah 57:15-16

"For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, With him who has a contrite and humble spirit, To revive the spirit of the humble, And to revive the heart of the contrite ones. ¹⁶For I will not contend forever, Nor will I always be angry; For the spirit would fail before Me, And the souls which I have made."

A few things from this passage that now begin to stand out.

1. The Triune God is holy. Even His Name is Holy. That fact shouldn't surprise us.

2. The Triune God says that He dwells with "a contrite and humble spirit." How does the Triune God dwell with sinners? Yes, those sinners are described as contrite and humble, but the fact remains God is holy and they are not. Why would God care if they were sorrowful? God is just and they still deserve to be punished by a holy God.

3. The Triune God says that He is reviving or bringing back to life the spirit of the humble and heart of the contrite. Why is the holy God doing this work upon the heart and spirit?

4. Here is the important stuff! The Triune God declares "For I will not contend forever, Nor will I always be angry." It is simply amazing that the holy God declares that He will not "contend" with sin forever. It is shocking that our holy God is not always going to be angry with sin.

5. Finally, our holy God gives us the reason that He has turned from his righteous and holy wrath. He says that we would be utterly consumed. He is not doing this for His own sake, but for our sake. He says, "For the spirit would fail before Me, And the souls which I have made." The Triune God know that we could not stand up to His holiness. We could never stand up under the preaching of holiness.

Don't you see that God desires to dwell with His creation, called man? The Triune God desires to saved us. He desires that we would live with Him for eternity. Our holy God desires that we would be holy just as He is holy.

If our holy God had simply given the law and never given the Gospel, we would not be saved. We would never be saved! Our spirit and soul would fail, and God knew it. **Therefore, our Triune God didn't act only according to His holiness. He also acted according to His love, mercy and grace.**

--When the Prophet Isaiah experienced fear at the holiness of God, this contrite and humble man received forgiveness from the altar of the gracious and loving God.

--Through the law, Adam and Eve learned of their sin and out of fear hid from their holy God in garden. The Triune God promised them salvation through the male offspring. The loving God even covered their sin with clothing He had made for them.

--Of course, the Israelites failed to keep the Ten Commandments and worshipped a golden calf. Nevertheless, God knew that without mercy they would never, ever be saved. When Moses came down from the mountain with the second copy of the stone tablets. It was proclaimed in Exodus 34:6-7, "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, ⁷keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...." Those are the qualities which are most important about God's nature. Holy, yes, but merciful and gracious.

The Lord said in Isaiah 57:18, "I have seen his ways and I will heal him." God never intended the law of his holiness to save us. He intended that we come to

contrition and be humbled, so that we would receive His free gift of salvation in His Son Jesus Christ. God knew that “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

After the flood, Genesis 8 says, “And the Lord smelled a soothing aroma. Then the Lord said in His heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground for man’s sake, although the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done’” (Genesis 8:21). The Triune God knows our sinful condition and the thoughts of our evil heart. He provided a way out by mean of the ark of His church and Gospel message of His preacher Noah.

We don’t have a God who is a tyrannical dictator, who forces obedience by the threat of punishment. Instead, we have a heavenly Father, who know our sinful ways.” Though He created us holy we have gotten ourselves in a predicament of which we cannot save ourselves. In love for His created children, the Father has provided the message of the Word to disentangle them from their punishment. He uses the law of His holiness to create contrition and humbleness. He uses the gospel to create faith and forgive them from their sins. The Father punishes His Son so that He remains just in His holiness, and the one who justifies the sinner through the forgiveness of sins.

Those who resist His law and refused His promise of salvation, will receive the punishment of His holiness. But those contrite and humble sinners who believe and cling to God’s Son in faith will be saved. Your heavenly Father loves His creation so much that He provided a way of salvation that was apart from the law. Even though we retained a sinful nature, God’s mercy and grace forgave our sin.

Listen to the whole passage from Exodus 34, “The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, ⁷keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation.”

Those who mistaken teach objective justification act as if God is schizophrenic saying He is both angry and damning toward you, and also is loving and saving toward you. They say it is a paradox. Baloney. Yes, God is both holy and merciful, but the solution to this apparent dilemma is the suffering, death and resurrection of God’s Son. Those who refuse to be humbled and sorrowed by the law, remain in their sins. Those who refuse Jesus’ free declaration of righteousness remain in their sins. Our holy God will by no means clear the guilty. Nevertheless, in Christ there is forgiveness and sainthood. Those who believe and are baptized into Christ will be saved. Our Triune God knew what He was doing all along. Like a great physician God has healed us through His Word so that we will stand in His presence clothed in Christ’s righteousness.

Thus the Triune God at the end of today’s Old Testament reading does not speak of peace for both believers and unbelievers. Our God makes a distinction between those who believe and those who do not. He makes a distinction between those for whom God has revived the spirit and the heart. He makes a distinction between those who have become contrite and humble in spirit.

Listen to Isaiah 57:19-21

Verse 19 says of the believers: “I create the fruit of the lips: Peace, peace to him who is far off and to him who is near,” Says the Lord, “And I will heal him.”

Verse 20-21 says of the unbelievers: “But the wicked are like the troubled sea, When it cannot rest, Whose waters cast up mire and dirt. ²¹“There is no peace,”

Says my God, "for the wicked."

So similarly in Today's Holy Gospel Jesus says, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.
¹⁸He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:17-18).