

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 6, 2016**

**THE BENEFITS OF GRACE:
SAVED FROM GOD'S WRATH**

Romans 5:6-11

DEATH ROW

I don't know anyone personally who was ever on death row. But I once knew the mother of a death-row inmate. In 1983, William Bradfield, an English teacher at a suburban Philadelphia high school, was convicted of conspiracy in the murders of his fiancée, Susan Reinert (also an English teacher at the same school), and her two young children in 1979. To this day the bodies of the children have never been found. Prosecutors believe Bradfield's motive was to collect \$750,000 as the sole beneficiary of Reinert's life insurance. Though he spent six years on death row and was serving three consecutive life sentences at the time of his death in 1998, Bradfield steadfastly denied having anything to do with the murders.

It was a bizarre case that became known in the Philadelphia area as "the Main Line Murders." Though the circumstantial evidence against Bradfield was strong, at this point, only God knows for sure who did it. One other person was convicted along with Bradfield, but both men maintained their innocence and said the other had done it. One person who clung desperately to her belief in Bradfield's innocence was his widowed mother, Nona Bradfield, who was a member of the church in Downingtown, PA where I was ordained and served as Assistant Pastor after graduating from seminary in 1983. She was a sweet older woman with a sincere faith in Christ. Mrs. Bradfield could not believe her son could possibly be guilty of such a terrible crime. In the years we knew her (we moved from Downingtown to Altoona, PA in 1986 and she died in 1993), she seemed to be perpetually in grief over what had happened to her son, and longed for him to be exonerated. But he never was. Possibly because he really was guilty. I don't know.

It is true that not everybody who ends up on death row deserves to be there. Though many – or most – are, not everyone is guilty of the crime(s) for which they are convicted. According to the Innocence Project, founded in 1992 for the purpose of "exonerating wrongly convicted individuals through DNA testing and reforming the criminal justice system to prevent future injustice", some 337 individuals convicted of serious crimes in the U.S. have been exonerated by DNA testing since 1989, including 18 persons who had been sentenced to death.

Including:

- Glenn Ford (not the actor), who spent 30 years on death row in Angola prison for a murder he did not commit before his release in 2014; and
- Michael Blair, who was exonerated by DNA tests in 2008 after serving 14 years on death row in Texas for a murder he did not commit.

Some people on death row don't deserve to be there. From a biblical perspective, though, death row is where we all deserve to be. The death penalty is what we all deserve. Without

exception. And, in fact, it is what we have all received. From the time Adam and Eve sinned against God in the garden, the entire human race has lived under the cloud of the death penalty, since, as we will see a bit later in Romans 5, death itself entered the world as a result of sin.

The death penalty is what we deserve, and death row is where we deserve to be, because every single one of us has resisted, rejected, and rebelled against the righteous rule of God in our lives. In the pursuit of our own pleasure and fulfillment, each of us has committed treason against the true King of the universe.

Treason is a serious charge, I know. But isn't it true that choosing to ignore or disobey a directive from our Commander-in-Chief, and instead acting in concert with the enemy of God (who is also the enemy of our souls) is treason? All of us have turned from God's way to go our own way instead (Isaiah 53:6). Every single one of us is guilty of a capital crime in God's eyes, for, as Paul says in Romans 6:23, "the wages of sin is" – what? – "death." All of us have sinned and fall short of the standard of God's glory (Romans 3:23). Without exception, we are natural-born sinners. By nature we are rebels who want to be the captains of our own fate and the masters of our own destiny. You know it is true.

Where does all of this lead? To death row, where the full fury of God's wrath against sin and evil and rebellion awaits everyone who refuses to embrace the saving grace of God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, who satisfied the wrath of God against sin by means of His death on the cross for us and fulfilled the requirements of God's justice by taking the penalty for our sins upon Himself, making atonement for our sins, once and for all.

THE WRATH OF GOD

It is not popular to talk about the wrath of God these days. It is not something we like to think about. We may be embarrassed by it, or, at least, by the ways some people distort it or misrepresent it. But the Bible teaches that the wrath of God is real. It is something we dare not ignore. J. I. Packer has a chapter on the wrath of God in his classic book *Knowing God*, in which he writes: "One of the most striking things about the Bible is the vigor with which both Testaments" – Old and New – "emphasize the reality and terror of God's wrath" (*Knowing God*, 134-135). The wrath of God is as real and terrible in the New Testament as in the Old.

According to the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (2nd Edition), the wrath of God is "the settled opposition of His holiness to evil" of any kind in any form. In other words, it is the perfectly righteous, just, and holy response of a perfectly righteous, just, and holy God to sin and evil, anywhere and everywhere in the whole creation.

SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD

Probably the most famous sermon ever preached on American soil is the sermon Jonathan Edwards preached in Enfield, CT in 1741. No doubt some of you have heard of it. The sermon is entitled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." In it, Edwards, who typically

read his sermons in a monotone voice, describes the awful terrors of the wrath of God to come on unrepentant sinners in such vivid, graphic, and frightening terms that unconverted people in that congregation were weeping, wailing, and screaming in anguish as they pondered the horrible reality of hell. Edwards intended to conclude his sermon with an appeal to his listeners to respond to the mercy and grace of God offered in Christ by coming to the Savior in repentance and trusting faith. But the Holy Spirit so convicted the people of Enfield of their need of the Savior that day, that Edwards never got the chance to finish his sermon. It was not his usual style to try to “scare the hell out of people.” But Edwards did believe that warning people of the reality of God’s wrath and the awfulness of hell was a way of showing his love – and God’s love – for them.

Ultimately, Edwards wanted his hearers to understand not that we are sinners in the hands of an angry God, but that, for all who will accept it, for all who will come to Him in true repentance and faith, we are sinners in the hands of a merciful and gracious God.

LOVE AND WRATH

Some people think that God cannot be both a God of love and a God of wrath (or anger or judgment). They think that wrath and love are incompatible. Theologian Miroslav Volf used to be among them. There was a time he thought the notion of God’s wrath was barbaric and unworthy of a God of love. Then, in the 1990s, his homeland, Croatia, endured a brutal war. People committed terrible atrocities against their neighbors and fellow countrymen, which caused Volf to change his mind. He says:

“My last resistance to the idea of God’s wrath was a casualty of war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 were killed and over 3 million were displaced Villages and cities were destroyed, my people [were] shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry.

“Or think of Rwanda ... where 800,000 people were hacked to death in 100 days! How did God react to the carnage? By doting on the perpetrators in a grandfatherly fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath but instead affirming the perpetrators’ basic goodness?”

I don’t think so.

“Wasn’t God fiercely angry with them?”

If Volf were to write about this today, no doubt he would speak of the horrific evil of terrorist attacks around the world, the displacement and suffering of millions of refugees from Syria and Iraq, and the genocide being carried out against Christians by ISIS and other Muslim extremists. How could God *not* be angry about these things?

Volf continues: “Though I used to complain about [what I perceived to be] the indecency of the idea of God’s wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who was not

full of wrath at the sight of the world's evil. God is not wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love" (Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*, 138-139).

The wrath of God against sin and evil, you see, is *not* incompatible with the love of God. God's anger toward rebellious, unrepentant sinners does not negate or violate or eradicate His love for this world full of sinners. Both immeasurable love and righteous anger are attributes of the character of God.

The wrath of God in the form of an eternal death penalty in hell is what we deserve. Every. Last. One. Of. Us. In fact, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:3, like the rest of the human race, "we were by nature objects of wrath." We are guilty of the same sinful traits about which Paul writes in Colossians 3:6, that "because of these, the wrath of God is coming." As we read in Hebrews 10:31, "it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." A dreadful, frightful, awful thing.

SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF A GRACIOUS GOD

But then we read Romans 5:9, where Paul says: "Since we have now been justified by the blood of Christ, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through Him!"

Yes, judgment and wrath are what we deserve from God. After all, look at the way Paul describes us and the condition of our souls apart from Christ.

- In verse 6, he says we were "powerless" – by which he means, unable to fix what was wrong with us and helpless to save ourselves. "Ungodly" is another word he uses to describe us.
- In verse 8, he says it was "while we were still sinners", living in opposition to and rebellion against God, that "Christ died for us."
- In verse 10, he speaks of us as "God's enemies", which is what we were – and are – except for His grace.

What we deserve is God's wrath. The fury of His anger. But, for those who are justified (declared righteous) in the sight of God by His grace through faith in Jesus Christ His Son, who demonstrated the love of God for us by bearing our sins in His body on the cross *and* by enduring the full fury of God's righteous wrath for us, wrath is not what we get. Through the blood of Jesus shed for us, we *have been justified*, we *have been reconciled* to God, we *have been saved*, and we *shall be saved* from the wrath of God on the day of judgment to come.

That we do not get what we deserve from God is all mercy and grace. It is all *His* mercy and grace. It all comes to us as a free gift. But it cost Jesus in ways we can barely begin to imagine as the wrath of God against sin – against *our* sin, against *your* sin, against *my* sin – was poured out on Him.

The Bible says that Jesus, by His grace, has rescued us from the wrath of God to come (1 Thessalonians 1:10). He has freed us from the death penalty we deserve. He has given us the gift of eternal life and fellowship with Him. Death row is not your destiny if your heart is

settled in Christ. The Bible says: “God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:9). Because of Jesus and what He has done for us, we really are sinners in the hands of a merciful and gracious God.

If you have been made right with God through faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ and you belong to Him, all these benefits of grace are yours:

- Peace with God.
- Unrestricted access to the grace of God you need in every moment in every situation for every need.
- A hope in Christ that will not disappoint you.
- Joy in the midst of suffering.
- The assurance of salvation from the wrath of God. Now and forever.

The wrath of God is real. To be in mortal danger of hell as an unsaved, unconverted sinner in the hands of an angry God is a frightful thing. If that is where you are today, don't stay there! Turn to Jesus. Come to Jesus. Run to Jesus. Open your heart to Jesus. Let today be the day of salvation. You never know if tomorrow will be too late.

Yes, God's wrath is real. But so is His grace. And what amazing grace it is! What amazing love! What an amazing God! May we rejoice not only in the benefits of His grace, but even more in God Himself through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have been reconciled to God (Romans 5:11).

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.