

## NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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God in the Hands of Angry People

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July 8, 1741, a Puritan Pastor named Jonathan Edwards preached a sermon that might rank as the most famous sermon in American history. Even if you did not grow up in church and many of you did not you probably know this sermon from a class in American literature. It's called 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God' and I take issue with the title and I take issue with the tone and I take issue with the tact. Here's what Edwards said in that sermon; The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked. His wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire. He is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times as abominable in his eyes as the most hateful, venomous serpent is in yours. Let me say this, Jonathan Edwards was a brilliant academic, he went to Yale at the age of 12, he was the third president of Princeton, he was a devoted pastor, he was a prolific author and I have been personally impacted by his writings and by his life. This is not pick on Jonathan Edwards day and I hold myself to the same standard I'm about to apply. You know, I try to say this every so often, don't take my word for it my word is not the Gospel; the Gospel is the Gospel and the Bible is our final authority when it comes to faith and practice. You need to test what I say against scripture and if it doesn't line up with scripture you need to call me on the carpet. Won't be the first time, probably won't be the last time because I'm as imperfect as Jonathan Edwards. That said this sermon 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God' I think it's cast a shadow over the Gospel that is done more harm than good for about 277 years. I understand it was a different day, I understand it was a different culture but it's still wrong. Somehow turned the good news into the bad news and it doesn't just betray the Gospel I think it betrays the heart of God. I'm not saying God is not just, he is. I'm not saying God is not holy, he is. But the Bible does not say God is angry; the Bible says God is love. Does he get angry? Yes. Can I tell you what he gets angry at? Not you here it is, Proverb says these six things the Lord hates yes seven are an abomination to Him: a proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift and running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies and one who sows discord among brethren. Why does God hate those things? Because they hurt us and he loves us. Listen God hates evil, God hates injustice, God hates hypocrisy, loves you. You are not a spider dangling over the pit of Hell. Genesis 1:26 says you were created in his very image. Ephesians 2:10 says that you are God's workmanship. Haggai 2:23 says you were God's signet ring. Zechariah 2:8 says you were the apple of God's eye.

Last week I shared a little story about the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby. After he spoke at that conference I referenced he was asked a question. What is the chief challenge we face as Christ followers? The Archbishop did not skip a beat, had an immediate answer to that question. He said every Christian I know cannot quite believe that God loves them. God doesn't just love you, he likes you. Jeremiah 31:3 says I have

loved you with an everlasting love. Zephaniah 3:17 says God rejoices over you with singing.

When I was a kid we used to play a game with my grandma. It was called hide the thimble. She would take one of her sewing thimbles and she would hide it and if we were getting further and further away she would say you're getting colder, colder. If we were getting closer and closer to that thimble she would say you're getting warmer, warmer. And of course right when we were about to find that thimble my grandma would say you're getting hotter, hotter. This is what children did before video games. We played hide the thimble and it was awesome. If your God is angry you're getting colder, colder. If your God is loving you're getting warmer, warmer.

This weekend we begin a series 'God in the Hands of Angry People' and I want to go all the way back to the beginning. Genesis chapter 1 verse 27 it says this; "so God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them male and female he created them." Then God blessed them. In the beginning, God created us in his image we have been creating God in our image ever since. There's a word for this it's anthropomorphism and it's this idea of projecting human characteristics on God and we do it in a hundred different ways and what you end up with is a distorted view of God that looks an awful lot like us. And in the words of A. W. Tozer, we get a God who can never surprise us, never astonish us, never overwhelm us, never transcend us. Why? Because he's the God we've created in our image. He's a figment of our imagination. That's the God that over the next six weeks we'd like to dismantle and we'd like to try to rediscover the God of the Bible and I have a feeling that God might surprise some of us. Now A. W. Tozer says what comes to mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you. I think that's true and I think it's why this series is so important.

A few months ago I read a book by Michael Lewis titled 'The Undoing Project.' It profiles an Israeli-American psychologist that many of you will recognize, Daniel Kahneman. Kahneman won the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for his work, groundbreaking work in behavioral economics which I'm fascinated by. I had read some of what Kahneman had written and so I thought I want to hear a little bit of his back-story. And so I read that little book and what I'm about to share with you is such a thin slice of Kahneman life but it caught my attention and I think he would say it was a defining moment Let me quote from the book, "at the age of thirteen Danny made his final decision about God." And before I tell you what that final decision was I want to make an observation. I'm going to say this lovingly and respectfully. Does it matter whether you're an atheist or Christian somewhere in between please don't make your final decision about God at 13 or for that matter at 22, or 42, or 82? I want to tell you why. God is the same yesterday, today and forever, he does not change but faith is not static. If you had the same faith you had two years ago 'Houston we have a problem'. See there are lots of people have been following Christ for 25 years but they don't have 25 years of experience they have one year of experience repeated 25 times. Paul said in I Corinthians 13:11 'when I was a child I spoke and thought and reasoned like a child but when I grew up, when I grew up I put childish ways behind me.' Your faith has to grow up. I put my

faith in Christ when I was five. Let's be honest, it was a five-year-old faith. It was a faith that was true and pure and good but it was five-year-old faith it was a faith that had to grow up. I have gone through so many upgrades, I've had to uninstall some things that I realized were wrong, I've had to download lots of new updates, I've lost my faith and found it again, I've had to deconstruct it and reconstruct it. I mean I think really the season as I look back on it when I went to the University of Chicago as an 18-year-old freshman and my faith was challenged what I discovered is this, I knew what I believed just didn't know why I believe what I believed. There is a big difference between those two things and I'm grateful that my faith was challenged because it had to be deconstructed and reconstructed. Listen your faith has to mature as you do but suffice it to say let's not make final decisions about God at 13 let's keep seeking and asking and knocking. And the reality is that same guy A. W. Tozer, I'm kind of trying to pull this from memory, said something to the effect eternity won't be long enough to praise him for all that he is or all that he has done or learn all that he is.

Back to Kahneman, here's how he described this defining moment in his life. I still remember where he was he said the street in Jerusalem, I remember thinking that I could imagine there was a God but not one who cared whether or not I masturbate. I reached the conclusion that there was no God. That was the end of my religious life. And that struck me, hmmm, I am not convinced that Daniel Kahneman was rejecting God, with all due respect. I think what happens is many of us reject a misrepresentation or misperception of who God is, in this case, a God who maybe cared more about masturbation than him. Here's how I've seen it play out so many times. Someone is mistreated in the name of God. That mistreatment is a misrepresentation of the heart of God and that misrepresentation turns into a misperception and we reject God but we're really rejecting the misrepresentation or the misperception. And this is nothing new, this is, listen, this is as old as the Gospel. Who rejected Jesus? This is both fascinating and disconcerting he was rejected by the most religious people on the planet, by the experts in the law, by the Pharisees. And why did they reject him? Because he didn't fit their LinkedIn profile, because he didn't check all of their theological boxes, because he broke their religious rules. Sometimes it makes me wonder who's right and who's wrong, who's in and who's out. What rules did he break? Well healed on the Sabbath, he ate with sinners, he celebrated Samaritans, he touched lepers, gave prostitutes a second chance. Those are the reasons they rejected him. What I'm saying is those are the wrong reasons. If you're going to reject God would you at least not reject a misrepresentation of who he is? And here's what I want to say; I think if you really discover who God is, his heart towards you, you're going to want to spend an eternity with him and he wants to spend eternity with you.

Let me zoom out a little bit; two weeks ago our campus pastor in Gainesville, Pastor Robb and Nicole gave birth to a beautiful little baby girl Laura Gertrude Schmidgall, we call her Trudy and it's amazing looking in newborn eyes. We met her when she was just a few hours old and a little picture of Laura and Trudy, gotta wonder with a little baby what's going through her mind, right. Like and don't I don't think much at that point but, but at a very early age here's what's going to happen Trudy will begin developing internal pictures of external realities. There's a phrase for this, is called representational

intelligence. At about six months Trudy will have an internal picture of her mom, Nicole; at about eight months takes a little bit longer she'll have an internal picture of her dad, Robb. And this process will never end. It's what we do in life, we internalize it is external realities. Now Trudy will turn into a toddler who will at some point start crawling all over tarnation, right. And you got to put up baby gates and socket covers because babies instinctively know the location of all fragile objects on low shelves and sharp corners and electrical outlets. Why? Because she'll have an internal map that she's internalized from her external reality. What I'm getting at is this the process of internalizing external reality never stops, we internalize everything and that includes God. What were those first impressions that you had and were they right or were they wrong? Over time we have all these pictures, you know sometimes it's someone we trust who hurts us, it might be a difficult circumstance, might be an unanswered prayer, might be a really well-meaning Sunday School teacher whose flannel graph really doesn't really match the exact picture of who Jesus is, could be a pastor who said something that wasn't true. All I know is this if Tozer is right what comes to mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you, my hunch is there's a few pictures there that probably shouldn't be and there's a few pictures that are not there that need to be. And if the Bible is this jigsaw puzzle of who God is I want to tell you the cover, the cover is Jesus. And we'll get there in a minute. In theology there's a concept called progressive revelation; I'll put it in relational terms; there's a revelation that happens over time when you're a relationship with someone. Lora and I've been married twenty-five years, I look back on the day we got married, first of all, we were kids and we barely knew each other, we had dated four years. Are you kidding me though after living life together for twenty-five years you get to know each other? When we got married we didn't even know our Myers Briggs type. How have we made it right? We didn't even know there was an enneagram. But there's been a beautiful progressive revelation and so twenty-five years later you just, there's something about that relationship that is so much different. I want to...Come on, I hate these moments they are so unplanned but man, I'm so grateful for a wife who has more integrity than anybody I know and who has been faithful to me and I've been faithful to her and I just wanted to say that.

Progressive revelation is this idea that God reveals more of his character over time. Now again God is the same yesterday, today, and forever it's not that God is changing. The Bible is inspired from beginning to end but the later books contain a fuller revelation of who God is than the earlier books, its progressive revelation. Listen, the oldest book in the Bible arguably is the book of Job predates the Pentateuch, probably and dates back to about 1500 BC the last book added to the New Testament is the book of Revelation. It was penned by the Apostle John on the Isle of Patmos around 95 AD. So what you have is a book written on three different continents, three different languages, over 1600 years, the authors include kings and prophets and farmers and fishermen. And the amazing thing is that it reads like one story which is incredible and that's because it is God-breathed because there is one author who inspired it the spirit of God, so there's one story-line. But wouldn't you expect a story written say around 1500 BC to maybe read a little bit different because of the cultural milieu, the historical context than a book that was perhaps written you know around 95 AD? Well, of course, you would. Now, we don't discount the Old Testament, it's the backdrop and let me say this if you want to appreciate

what Christ accomplished on the cross I think you've got to understand what happened in the Garden of Eden, I think you have to have an appreciation of the sacrificial system in the book Leviticus. But what I'm getting at is this the truest revelation of who God is, the fullest revelation of who God is is found in the person of Jesus Christ. I mean literally all of that is to say this good theology is Jesus, Jesus is good theology. Colossians 1:15 Christ is the image of the invisible God. So when you read the Old Testament here's a way to think of it; you need to understand it's a Polaroid picture. A Polaroid back in the day at an ideal temperature of 70 degrees Fahrenheit it would take about ten minutes for that Polaroid to fully develop. The Old Testament is a Polaroid picture and let's be honest it's fuzzy and places and it took thousands of years for that full picture to develop but when it's fully developed I'm telling you; the fulfillment of the law, the fulfillment of the prophets, the fulfillment of the promises is in the person of Jesus Christ. There's a basic principle in hermeneutics, the science of interpreting scripture, you've got to let the Bible interpret the Bible. In other words when you juxtapose text with text and you got to pay attention to context or you get pretext but the idea is that you've got to let verses that, shall we say or a little bit more developed, help interpret verses that are less developed. We read the Bible forward but we interpret the Bible backwards through the person of Jesus. Why? Because John 1 tells us he is the word. Jesus is the fulfillment, he's the word made flesh, he is Emmanuel, God with us, son of God, son of man. Romans 5 says this, 'very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die, but God reveals his love for us in this, that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.' There is a God who loves us when we least expect it and least deserve it and his name is Jesus.

Well, let me try to bring this down to earth and we've got six weeks on this journey so stick with us. This past week marked the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King Jr. The night before he was gunned down he preached an incredibly prophetic sermon titled I Have Been to the Mountain Top. If you haven't read it, you need to. With all due respect, I think it comes much closer to capturing the heart of God than Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. Dr King that night reflected on the fight for civil rights he was in Memphis, Tennessee but he was reminiscing about the battle that they had fought in Birmingham, Alabama. For two decades Bull Connor served as commissioner of public safety in Birmingham. He didn't just oppose the civil rights movement he became the symbol of institutional racism. It was Bull Connor who unleashed the attack dogs, ordered the use of fire hoses and when the freedom riders were brutally beaten by the KKK Bull Connor withheld police protection. Dr King said this, Bull Connor sent the dogs, Bull Connor turned on the fire hoses but Bull Connor didn't know history. He said there's a certain kind of fire that no water can put out. He said there was a power that Bull Connor couldn't adjust to and so we ended up transforming Bull into a steer and we won our struggle in Birmingham. How did they do it? Dr King said we didn't need bricks and bottles. Why? Cause we don't wage wars the world does. II Corinthians 10:3 the weapons we fight with are not the weapons of this world. So what is our weapon? Well, you don't fight fire with fire, you don't fight violence with violence, you don't fight injustice with injustice and two wrongs never make a right.

So Friday night Lora and I are taking a walk because it was too nice not to. Its remarkable how many front yards in Capitol Hill have yard signs and how many of those yard signs quote Dr King. Here's one of them; 'love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend'. Jesus didn't just know that he invented it; he embodied it and so in his letter from Birmingham jail Dr King responded to white clergy who accused him of being an extremist. He wrote a brilliant response, a loving rebuke and this is what he said, 'was not Jesus an extremist in love?' Love your enemies; bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you. Was not Amos an extremist for justice? Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. Was not Paul an extremist for the Gospel of Jesus Christ? I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus. Was not Martin Luther an extremist? Here I stand I can do no other so help me God. And the list goes on but I'll stop there. Dr King said this, so the question is not whether we will be extremists but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love?

Let me close with this question, it's not complicated, it's pretty simple but it might be worth a little self-reflection. What kind of extremists are you? If you're fueled by anger you are getting colder and colder but if the love of Christ compels you now we're getting warmer in warmer, if you are loving your enemies, if you are praying for those who persecute you, if someone is asking for your shirt and you're giving them your coat as well, now we're getting hot now God's kingdom is coming and his will is being done. One last thought if we're going to be great at anything let's be great at the great commandments, love the Lord your God with all of your heart and soul and mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. In Jesus name, Amen.