

Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

Have you ever noticed how one person's big moment of absolute joy is another's worst nightmare?

What was your reaction when the ball landed in Mark Teixeira's glove to record that last out to give the Yankees the World Series? How about that catch by Santonio Holmes to virtually end the Super Bowl this year?

Or more importantly – maybe some of you remember how you felt on September 2, 1945 when Japan signed the surrender of World War II? Ask a Veteran this Veteran's Day. Those were some intense emotions. Or how about September 11, 2001?

In all of those – one side was celebrating a victory – another mourning a loss.

That's the reality of the truth we are forced to deal with on this day in the church year known as "Last Judgment Sunday". You heard the prophet Malachi lay out the two polar opposite results of that Day. You heard the writer to the Hebrews proclaim how certainly we'll all face it – "**Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.**" Like the hymn writer wrote - *The day is surely drawing near when God's Son the Anointed shall with great majesty appear as judge of all appointed. All mirth and laughter then shall cease when flames on flames will still increase as Scripture truly teaches.*

Judgment Day is coming. How do you feel about it?

Allow me to read a quote from a sermon far more famous than any I've preached.

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment.

There are pages of this. This is the text of the now pretty famous sermon preached some 268 years ago by a New England preacher named Jonathan Edwards (1741) entitled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." He goes into detail describing that wrath and the reason for it and the helplessness you should feel – lots of detail – lots of wrath – and I can imagine a whole lot of saliva spraying as this thing was first preached.

And when you think about it – this is the kind of thing you'd think we should hear on a Sunday talking about God's Judgment, isn't it? Our text says in verse 29 – "**Those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.**" And if that isn't me, I don't know what is. I have done evil. So have you. You know God's standards, right? If you're familiar with this book at all – you know God's standards. "**Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.**" "**Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.**" "**Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.**" "**The soul that sins is the one that will die.**" You know God's standards. Yes or no. All or nothing. Go or no go. There is no "sort of" with God.

So for your felony – you deserve an eternity of hell. For your divorce, you deserve separation from God. For your abuse, you deserve to be abused. But, just as severely - for your selfishness, you deserve God to stop considering you and drop you into that pit of raging fire. For your anger, you deserve his wrath. Even for your thought, that one you stopped yourself from speaking – that one less than perfect thought should mean God wouldn't think of you again. You should be "sinners in the hands of an angry, angry God." Jonathan Edwards was right.

But – wait a second. You heard vicar read our text, where Jesus – God made flesh, discussed this topic - and I didn't see one single saliva shuttle launching from his mouth. You weren't trembling when he got done. So what gives?

If you're wondering that, let me introduce you to God, not the caricature of God that human minds develop by combining a woefully inadequate amount of Scripture knowledge with that thing called guilt. Let me introduce you to the God our minds wouldn't fathom and couldn't understand. But, nonetheless, let me introduce you to God, the True God this time, as he describes himself. In our text, that's really what Jesus is doing. Look at the Gospel Lesson there.

Really, what's going on here in this section is that Jesus is talking about his being true God, answering those critics. And he brings up this Judgment stuff just to make his point. You might have noticed that the first

verses were him explaining that relationship between the Father and the Son, how nothing is done without the other – the three persons are truly one God, there is one essence. Yet, verse 22 mentions how, from our perspective, the work seems to be divided up. The dogmatists would say “opera ad extra divisa sunt.” Come to Bible Study next Sunday and ask for more on that if you want it – but for now – just notice how Jesus is making the point that He’s God and that God – all three persons - deserve the same honor, glory and power – and if you don’t have this Triune God – you aren’t honoring God. Period.

That’s where he gets into this judgment stuff – you’re either for him or against him. You’ll either be with him forever or separated from him forever. You will either, as our text says, “**Rise to live**” or “**Rise to be condemned.**” That’s what’s coming on that day – Judgment Day – THE day.

And we know how our eyes would classify our status if we truly measured ourselves against the standards that are set for that day and not according to some imaginary sliding scale or “grading on the curve” that so much of humanity is wishing for. God’s standards are set and they are exact. Like we said before – the verdict we should receive is pretty clear.

But look at verses 24 and 25 – Jesus changed all that. Two times in two verses he busts out his famous call to attention. The King James translates it “Verily, verily I say unto you.” The NIV says “I tell you the truth.” The Greek doubles up the word AMEN, (amhn amhn legw umin) all to say – listen – this is important – this is what you have to understand before you even try to grasp anything else we’re talking about.

And what is so important? Verse 24: “**Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.**” What?! Not condemned? But what about the standards? “Verily verily I say unto you” – whoever hears and believes. You see what he’s doing? He’s telling us that the standard is not according to what we see. It’s according to what God sees. It is all about the Word. Just believe it. That word changes things. Believe when Jesus says he lays down his life for the sheep. Believe when he says that his blood washed away the sin of the world – our sins. Believe when he says that he is clothing us with his perfection. Believe when he says that His Word gives us the power to believe. You have crossed over from death to life.

But how!?! Our mind races: what about the standards, we ask? What about what I deserve? So again Jesus says – “Verily Verily,” Amen, Amen – I tell you the truth, make sure you understand this: **A time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.** The dead – yes, I recognize that name – that’s me because of my sin. Now what did he say about the dead? The time is NOW when the dead hear the voice of the Son of God and because of that – we live. We have life. *WE* have crossed over from death to life.

Do you see what this reveals about our God? Yes, he is the One in control who made us and demanded perfection. And he is the one who provided that perfection for our record. Our God – the one Jesus was explaining – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -accomplished this situation where the death we deserve is gone because Jesus died it already – and the life we can’t even imagine is ours because perfection is on our record.

So – Last Judgment Sunday: “Sinners in the hand of an angry God?” Not us. That was Jesus. That’s been done. And through His Word he has brought us over from that death to true, eternal life. That changes how we live our life, doesn’t it? So do not be amazed, our text says, “**for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice** ²⁹ **and come out-- those who have done good will rise to live.**” And that is not something that should amaze, or trouble us, Jesus says - because Jesus, the judge, doesn’t see the evil I do. He sees the good Christ has done in me.

So – it’s a big day coming. Thankfully, we don’t have to wait to see how it will turn out to find out whether it is a win or a loss. We don’t have to stay in suspense for what that last play will mean. We know. We’ve seen the play. We’ve seen our substitute on that cross crushing Satan’s head and we’ve seen him rise in victory over death on Easter. You have crossed over from death to life. In Christ, Amen.