

God's Terribleness and Gentleness

by Joseph Parker

Joseph Parker's sermon explores the dual nature of God as both terrible and gentle, emphasizing the importance of trusting in His power and guidance.

Scripture: Psalm 37:35, Psalm 55:22, Proverbs 3:5, Isaiah 33:14, Isaiah 40:10, Isaiah 41:10, Isaiah 42:16, Isaiah 57:15, Hebrews 12:29, 1 John 4:8

Topics: "God's Nature", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Joseph Parker preaches about the contrasting truths of God's power and restraint, emphasizing the importance of understanding and embracing both aspects. He illustrates how God's power, like fire and water, can bring destruction or devastation when misused, yet can also provide warmth, refreshment, and life when properly regulated. Parker highlights the need for individuals to build their character with foresight and wisdom, just as they would build a house to withstand all seasons. He urges listeners to prepare for the rough seas of life by acknowledging God's judgment and righteousness, and to trust in His guidance and provision, especially in times of weakness and need.

Transcript

IT IS A FEARFUL THING TO FALL INTO THE HANDS OF THE LIVING GOD. It is better to fall into the hands of men. Our God is a consuming fire - God is love. These are great, yet contradicting truths about our God.

The combination of great power and great restraint-indeed, the combination of opposite qualities and uses generally-is well-known in civilized life and in the laws of nature. The fire that warms the room when properly regulated, will, if abused, reduce the proudest palaces to ashes. The river, which softens and refreshes the landscape, if allowed to escape its banks, can devastate the most fruitful fields.

The engine, which swiftly bears the laughing child to his longed-for home, will, if mismanaged, wreak the most terrible havoc. The lightning, which may be caught and utilized by genius and skill, can bum the forest and strike armies blind.

We are familiar with such illustrations of united opposites. Our knowledge of them inspires our enterprise and makes cautious the noble audacity of practical science.

In our text in Isaiah we are confronted with the highest expression of the same truth: The mighty God is the everlasting Father; the terrible One is more gentle than the gentlest friend; He who rides in the chariot of thunder stoops to lead the blind by a way that they know not and to gather the lambs in His bosom.

In pointing out the terribleness of God, I do not appeal to fear. I do so to support and encourage the most loving confidence in His government. We do not say, "Be good, or God will crush you." That is not virtue, that is not liberty-it is vice put on its good behavior. It is iniquity with a sword suspended over its head. It is not even negative goodness, but mischief put hors de combat.

The great truth to be learned is that all the terribleness of God is the good man's security. When the good man sees God wasting the mountains and the hills, and drying up the rivers, he does not say, "I must worship Him or He will destroy me." He says, "The beneficent side of that power is all mine. Because of that power I am safe. The very lightning is my guardian, and in the whirlwind I hear a pledge of benediction."

The good man is delivered from the fear of power. Power has become to him an assurance of rest. He says, "My Father has infinite resources of judgment, and every one of them is to my trusting heart a signal of unsearchable riches of mercy."

Destruction and God

Look at the doctrine of the text in relation to bad men who pride themselves in their success and their strength. Daily life has always been a problem to devout wisdom.

Virtue has often been crushed out of the front rank as vice forced its way to preeminence. The praying man often has to kneel upon cold stones while the profane man walks on velvet. These are commonplace occurrences in the daily study of the affairs of men.

The doctrine of the text teaches that there is a power beyond man's and that nothing is held safely which is not held by consent of that power. Think of wealth as a mountain or of social position as a hill. God says, "I will make waste mountains and hills."

Our greatest is nothing to Him; our mountain smokes when He touches it, and our rock melts at His presence. All our gain, our honor, our standing should be looked at in the light of this solemn doctrine.

We are not at liberty to exclude the destructive power of God from our practical theology. We have not to make a God, to fancy a God, or to propose a modification of a suggested God-God is before us in His might, His glory, and His love. Our portion is to acquaint ourselves with Him.

God is not to be described in parts; He is to be comprehended in the unity of His character. A child describing the lightning might say, "It was beautiful, so bright, and swifter than any flying bird, and so quiet that I could not hear it as it passed through the air." That description would be true.

A tree might say, "It was awful. It tore off branches that had been growing for a hundred years; it rent me in twain down to the very root, and no summer can ever recover me-I am left here to die." This also would be true.

So it is with Almighty God; He is terrible in power, making nothing of all that man counts strong, yet He will not break the bruised reed nor quench the smoking flax.

Building Houses; Building Character

Men are bound to be as commonsense in their theology as they are in the ordinary works of life. For example, in building character they are to use at least as much foresight and wisdom as they do in building their houses of stone. How do we conduct our arrangements in building a house?

Suppose it were possible for a man never to have seen any season but summer. Then suppose that this man was called upon to advise in the erection of a building. You can imagine his procedure; everything is to be light, because he never heard a high wind. Waterpipes may be exposed, for he never felt the severity of frost. The most flimsy roof will be sufficient, for he knows nothing of the great rains of winter and spring.

Tell such a man that the winds will become stormy, that the rivers will be chilled into ice, that his windows will be blinded with snow, and that floods will beat upon his roof. If he is a wise man, he will say, "I must not build for one season, but for all seasons. I must not build for fine days, but for days that will be tempestuous. I must, as far as possible, prepare for the most inclement and trying weather." That is simple common sense.

Why be less sensible in building a character than in building a house? We build our bricks for severity as well as for sunshine, so why build our character with less care? If in summer we think about the frost, why not in prosperity have some thought for adversity? If in July we prepare for December, why not in the flattering hour of exultation think of the judgment that is at once infallible and irresistible?

As he would be infinitely foolish who would build his house without thinking of the natural forces that will try its strength, so is he cursed with insanity who builds his character without thinking of the fire with which God will try every man's work.

Preparing for Rough Seas

Is not the same truth illustrated by every ship on the great seas? The child who has only sailed his paper boat on the edge of a placid lake might wonder why enormous beams and bars of iron, innumerable bolts and screws, and clasps and bars of metal are needed in making a ship.

Ask the sailor, and he will answer. He says we must be prepared for something more than calm days. We must look ahead. The breakers will try us, and the winds will put us to the test. We may come upon an unknown rock; we must be prepared for the worst as well as for the best.

We call this prudence. We condemn its omission. We applaud its observance. What happens to men who attempt the stormy and treacherous waters of life without any regard for the probable dangers of the voyage?

We prepare for the severe side of nature-why ignore the severe aspect of God? We think of fire in building our houses-why forget it in building our character? On one side of our life we are constantly on the outlook for danger-why forget it where the destiny of the soul is concerned?

When a man builds his house or his ship strongly, we do not say that he is the victim of fear. We never think of calling him a fanatic. Instead, we say that he is a cautious and even scientific man.

Likewise, when I make appeal to the severity of God-to His fire, His sword, His destroying tempests and floods-I am not preaching the mere terrors of the Lord to move people by alarm rather than by love. I am simply being faithful to facts-I am reminding you that God is not less complete than the seasons which He has made. And I am asking you in the summer of His mercies not to forget the winter of His judgments!

Winter Is Coming

The so-called success of the bad man has yet to stand the strain of divine trial. God will go through our money to see if it has been honestly obtained. He will search our reputation, and our hypocrisy will not be able to conceal the reality of the case from His all-seeing eye. He will examine our title-deeds, and if we have ill-gotten property, He will set the universe against us until we restore it with penitence or have it wrenched out of our keeping by retributive misfortune. Yes, though our strength be as a mountain, it shall be wasted; though it be as a hill, it shall be blown away, and the world will see how poorly they build who build only for the light and quietness of summer. Do not say the winter is long in coming; it will come, and that is the one fact that should move our concern and bring us to wisdom.

In these days when the world is in a constant panic when men are over-driving one another, when commerce has been turned into gambling, and thieves pass as honest men it is essential that we all remind ourselves that God will judge people righteously and try all men by the test of His own holiness.

Remember, we are not stronger than the weakest point in the walls of our character. And true wisdom requires that we watch even the smallest gate that is insufficient or insecure.

When the Least Have the Most

Look at the doctrine of the text as an encouragement to all men who work under the guidance of God. "I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not: I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight."

God thus declares himself gentle to those who truly need Him. He promises nothing to the self-sufficient; He promises much to the needy. The text shows the principle upon which divine help is given to men-the principle of conscious need and of willingness to be guided.

Let a man say, "I am rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing," and God will leave him to his proud sufficiency. Let this man, on the other hand, feel his weakness and insignificance, and God will bless him with all the help that he requires in the most difficult passages of life.

A true understanding of this doctrine will give us a new view of daily providences: Men who are apparently most destitute may in reality be most richly enjoying the blessings of God. Clearly, we are not to judge human life by outward conditions. We are not to overlook the beneficent law of compensation.

Those who apparently have least may in reality have most. Who can tell what visions of Himself God grants to men who cannot see His outward works? Blindness may not be merely so much defect, but another condition of happiness. Who can say that it does not bring the soul so much nearer God?

Be that as it may, it is plainly taught in the text that God undertakes to lead all men who will yield themselves to His guidance. And their defects, instead of being a hindrance, are in reality the express conditions on which offers of divine help are founded.

It is because we are blind that He will lead us. It is because we are weak that He will carry us. It is because we have nothing that He offers to give us all things. God, addressing Himself to human weakness, is the complement of God wasting mountains and hills. God, shedding the morning dew on awaking flowers, is the complement of God terrifying the earth with tempests and vexing the sea with storms.

There is an unsearchable depth of pathos in the doctrine that God is gentle to human weakness and that He will make up with His own hands what is wanting in human faculty. Strong men seldom care for the weak, the blind are put on one side, the incapable are dismissed with impatience; but here is God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth taking the blind man's hand and leading him like a specially loved child!

Meddling in God's Work

Therefore, it is clear that self-sufficiency on the part of man is an offense to God. What's more, it is a vexation to man himself. All efforts at completeness and independence of strength end in mortification.

Toward one another we are to be self-reliant; toward God we are to be humble, dependent, all-trustful. How infinite is our folly in seeking to remove by our own power the mountains and hills that bar our way! God says He will remove them for us; why should we turn away His mighty arm?

He claims such work as His own; why should we meddle with it as if we could do it better than He? But some of us will meddle. We persist in seeking omnipotence in our own hands and trying to reach the tone that the winds and the seas will obey. We will do it.

The devil urges us, and we yield. He says, "Be your own God," and we snatch at the suggestion as a prize. He says, "This little mountain you might surely manage to remove," and then we set to work with pickaxe and shovel. Yet behold, the mountain grows as we strike it!

Still the tempter says, "It stands to reason that you must be making some impression upon it. Try again." And we try again, and again we fail. The mountain does not know us, the rock resents our intrusion, and having wasted our strength, the devil laughs at our impotence. He tells us in bitter mockery that we will do better next time! Yes! Next time-next time-and then next time-and then hell!

God says to us, when we stand at the foot of great hills and mountains, "I will beat them into dust, I will scatter the dust to the winds; there shall be a level path for your feet, if you will but put your trust in Me." That is a sublime offer. No man who has heard it ought to assume he is free to act as if God had not made a proposition to him.

Such propositions should endear God to our hearts. Here He is beside us, before us, round about us, to help, to lead, to bless us in every way. He is not a figure in the distant clouds. He does not make occasional appearances under circumstances that dazzle and confound us.

Instead He is always at our right hand, always within reach of our prayer, always putting out His hand when we come to dangerous places. As a mere conception of God, this reaches the point of sublimity. The coarsest mind might dream of God's infinite majesty, but only the richest quality of heart could have discovered Him in the touch of gentleness and the service of condescension.

Let us make such use of this revelation of the divine character as will save us from turning our theology into the chief terror of our lives. To some men, their theology is, indeed, a frightful specter. They would be

happier if they were atheists. They fitfully slumber on God's Terribleness and Gentleness / 75

the slopes of a volcano, and to them heaven itself is but the lesser of two evils.

Behold! Behold! I call you to a God whose very terribleness may be turned into an assurance of security, and whose love is infinite, unchanging, eternal!

God Has the Right of Way

Men of business! You whose barns are full, whose rivers overflow, on whose estates the sun has written "prosperity," and into whose harvest fields autumn has forced the richest of her golden sheaves! These things are all gifts of God, and He who gave them can also withdraw them. "I will destroy and devour at once I will dry up all their herbs."

He has the right of way through our fields and orchards. Our vineyards and oliveyards are His, and He can blow upon them till they wither. He can cause their blossom to go up like the dust. "I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green baytree. Yet he passed away, and, lo, he was not: yea, I sought him, but he could not be found" (Ps. 37:35, 36).

Not a fibre of his root could be discovered. Not so much as a withered leaf drifted into a ditch could be traced. All gone-the great branches gone-the bark gone-the trunk gone-the root gone-and the very name had perished from the recollection of men!

It is poor prosperity that is not held by God's favor. Gold goes a little way if it is not sanctified by prayer and giving of thanks. Bread cannot satisfy, unless it is broken by God's hands. Our fields may look well at night, but in the morning they may have been trampled by an invisible destroyer.

Do not say that I am urging you by fear; it is because of coming winter that I advise men to build strongly, and it is because of inevitable judgment that I call upon men to walk in the light of righteousness in all the transactions of life.

The Only One to Fear

Children of God, especially those who are called to suffering and weakness and great unrest because of manifold defect, God offers you His hand. Are you blind? He says, "I will lead the blind." Are you full of care? He says, "Let me carry your burden." Are you in sorrow? He says, "Call upon me in the day of trouble, and I will answer thee."

Is there a very steep road before you at this moment-in business, in your family, in your responsibilities? He says, "I will make waste mountains and hills, and the rough places shall be made plain."

So you are not alone-not alone, for the Father is with you. He is with you as a father-not to try your strength but to increase it; He is not with you to make experiments upon you but to magnify His grace in you by working out for you a wonderful redemption. Rest on God. His arm, not your own, must be your strength. Fear God, and no other fear will ever trouble you.

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