

HEBREWS VERSE BY VERSE - The New and Living Way - Part forty-two

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IF GOD IS ALWAYS NOTHING BUT LOVING TOWARD SINNERS WHY IS IT A "FEARFUL THING" FOR THEM TO FALL INTO HIS HANDS?

Hebrews 10:28-31 - "Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. [29] How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? [30] For we know him who said, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' [31] It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

I know I have to apologize for the way I'm opening up this morning teaching. There is something so important to me - and I believe to the future of the church - that I just have to do a lead-in to today's text. I hope you will see the connection later on. So we'll be **classroom** Cedarview for the first fifteen minutes and then **morning church** Cedarview for rest of the teaching.

I am just reading **Gregory Boyd's** new book, "**Cross Vision.**" On the back of the cover you have all the usual names giving their praise - **Brian Zahnd, Brian McLaren, Bruxy Cavey, and Rachel Held Evans**, who is a strong church voice supporting same-sex marriage in the church.

It is the latest in a string of books positing the same basic two or three arguments in the **anti-wrath of God** movement. All of the instances in the Old Testament that **seem** to reveal God acting **violently against sin** are really just the early stages of what these contemporary writers describe as **progressive revelation**. What **they** mean by that term is Moses and David and a host of others **thought** God was commanding all these bloody sacrifices and vengeful judgments on His enemies, but it was all just their own mistaken notion which they **attributed** to God.

In fact, what was happening was the thinking of these Old Testament writers was clouded by the practices of the violent religious culture around them. As a result they automatically **attributed** the same actions to their God as well. And God, well, He just allowed them to do this because one day, when Jesus came into the world, all of these **preliminary blind-spots about God** would be clarified and exposed by God graciously "**taking on**" or "**absorbing in Himself**" (still not sure what those words actually mean) all such violence in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ. God would then reveal His peaceful non-violent love and acceptance of this wicked power-hungry world. People would finally see the light.

With all of these contemporary authors this cultural editing of the Bible in no way diminishes their use of very orthodox terms. They still speak of their acceptance of the **divine inspiration of the Scriptures**. They would say - or at least most of them would say - they **believe** the Bible to be God's inspired word. And the way they do this is by changing the definition of the terms. Once you can switch the meaning of words you can do anything.

The key point to understand in this whole issue is the nature of **progressive revelation**. In itself it's not a bad term. In historical evangelical/reformed thought the term **progressive revelation** means the Scriptures move from lesser details of redemption in Christ to greater details of redemption in Christ. Like putting the pieces of a puzzle together, you see more and more of the picture as more and more pieces are included. **But progressive revelation has traditionally held that all of the pieces are God-given pieces**. The doctrine of progressive revelation has **never** held that the early ideas of the Old Testament were **man-generated** and the later **clarification of those ideas was from God**.

In other words - and this is the most important point of all - progressive revelation doesn't move from **less true** revelation to **more true** revelation. Revelation doesn't **evolve** from **inaccurate** to **accurate**. Revelation never - **never** - moves from **mistaken** to **correct**.

But these contemporary writers hold a **different** view of progressive revelation while they continue to use the same term. And it's a totally **different** view of the Bible. These writers hold to the idea that the early writers of the Scriptures hadn't yet evolved out of the **mistaken views of their own culture**. In other words, what they **thought**, and, more importantly for us, what they **said** they were getting from God they were actually getting from their own cultural understanding and conditioning.

So, for these writers, **progressive revelation** means moving from **more culturally distorted thinking** to - hopefully - **less culturally distorted thinking**. And, for our purposes, the implication of this is **progressive revelation** then means moving from a **more culturally polluted text** to a **less culturally polluted text**.

But this is a bad road to be on. This is a no-win hermeneutic. And here's why. There are scads of liberal scholars who do the **exact same thing to the New Testament message of Jesus** that **Boyd and Zahnd and McLaren** do to the **Old Testament prophet's view of God**. There have always been heavy-weight scholars like liberal **Rudolf Bultmann** who said the entire New Testament needed to be cleansed from the supernatural miracles that were clearly a textual addition from the cultural mind-set of the New Testament authors. This included the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

My point is simply this. There really is no safe place to draw the line as to which parts of the Bible you're going to rely on and which parts aren't safe to believe. **Boyd, McLaren, Zahnd**, and others are just deciding they endorse and trust what they read about Jesus - at least so far.

I still remember when, in my theological training, I had to review an old little book entitled, **"Protestant Biblical Interpretation"** by **Bernard Ramm**. His words have become more penetrating to me lately than they ever were when I first read them:

"...It is necessary to declare our rejection of the liberal's use of the idea of accommodation....To liberalism accommodation was the evisceration....of the doctrinal content of the Bible by explaining doctrinal passages as accommodations to the thought-patterns of the times of the Biblical writers. This same sort of error is true in the nth degree in Bultmann's theory of the mythology of the New Testament. The atonement as a vicarious sacrifice is a way in which first-century Christians thought of the cross but, it is asserted, we are not bound today to think of the cross in that manner...."

Now please take note of the next part of **Ramm's quote**. This is where he explains in very important terms the proper idea of **progressive revelation**:

"...By progressive revelation is not meant that the Biblical revelation is a process of evolution in the cultural/religious sphere. This idea of the evolution of religions in the scriptures was a means of denying the real revelatory content of Scripture and of undermining the uniqueness of Biblical revelation....By progressive revelation we mean that the Bible sets forth a movement of God, with the initiative coming from God and not man...."

That last phrase is the important one - **"...with the initiative coming from God and not man...."** This is the opposite of the way **Gregory Boyd** and **Brian Zahnd** and **Brian McLaren** describe progressive revelation. They see these Old Testament writers **telling us what they thought God was saying to them in these accounts of wrath and judgment**. But, they say, God wasn't saying anything of the kind. **Moses and the prophets were speaking out on their own**. The ideas and words **started with them**. They were **initiating a false idea which they simply copied from within the pagan surrounding religions**.

This is what **Ramm** insists is all wrong. **Boyd and Zahnd and McLaren** have these **Old Testament writers initiating their words from within their own cultural blindness**. These are their ideas **first**. They speak **before** God and **apart** from God. And God then fixes up their mistaken ideas later on as revelation progresses.

But, as **Ramm insists**, revelation **initiates with God** and comes **into** the culture from the **outside**. Certainly it speaks **to** the culture it initially enters - hence the Bible speaks about **crucifixion** and not the **electric chair**. But it still speaks **truth** to that culture and enters it from the **outside**.

Revelation is always **God initiated**. In other words, in keeping with our earlier picture-puzzle illustration, **progressive revelation** means **as the pieces of the puzzle are gradually given, God gives all the pieces. And all the pieces are as true as any of the others, even though the whole picture is gradual - or progressive - in coming**.

I should probably ask your forgiveness for this lengthy side-bar. But it **is** highly relevant for today's text. Today's text **isn't** an Old Testament text. It's a New Testament text written to a New Testament church. It's written for a church like **our** church. And it's also a very **discomforting text**. It's a text about the violent judgment of God.

- 1) **IT IS IMMEDIATELY OBVIOUS IN THIS TEXT THAT OUR NEW TESTAMENT WRITER CONSIDERED THE WRITING OF MOSES AND THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS THE UNCORRUPTED REVELATION OF GOD HIMSELF**

Hebrews 10:28-30 - "Anyone who has set aside the **law of Moses** dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. [29] How much **worse punishment**, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was

sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? [30] *For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay."* And again, *"The Lord will judge his people."*

Our writer deliberately quotes Moses' closing words to Israel just before Joshua takes over leadership. Take special note of *verse 30 - "For we know him who said, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge his people.'"*

Those two quotes about God's *"vengeance"* and *"judgment"* are taken directly from Moses' words in *Deuteronomy 32:35-36*. And I need you to see that our writer continues to do what he's always done with the dozens of quotations from the Old Testament writers. He sites all his Old Testament quotes as being spoken by God Himself - *"For we know him who said, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay....'"*

Clearly it wasn't *Moses* who was going to repay. Those were *God's* words. And the implication is one doesn't really *know* the truth about God unless one knows He said *this*. This was a revelation from *God*, not just the angry words of *Moses*. There is absolutely nothing in our Hebrews text that places these Old Testament words on a lower authoritative footing than the New Testament.

Truthfully, the New Testament *consistently* treats Old Testament revelations of God's wrath and judgment as accurate revelations of what God is actually like and what God actually does:

2 Peter 2:1-6 - "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. [2] And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. [3] And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. [4] For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment; [5] if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; [6] if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly...."

There's something important to remember when you read these words from the Apostle Peter. I will gladly risk repeating myself on one point. *Greg Boyd, Brian Zahnd, Brian McLaren* - and their writings are endorsed by *Bruce Cavey* - these writers unite around the idea that what we see of God revealed in Jesus *forces us to reject* these mistaken violent Old Testament images of God. In other words, you must *choose between* the revelation of God in Christ Jesus and these violent images of God in the Old Testament.

But then we stop and think. Wait a minute. Surely *Peter* had a pretty good picture of what Jesus was like. Surely Peter had seen the love and compassion and mercy of Jesus. Peter witnessed Jesus healing the lame and the blind. He saw Jesus feeding the hungry and reaching out to the poor and marginalized. Peter was one of the ones asking Jesus to teach him to pray.

Brian Zahnd never had lunch with Jesus. Greg Boyd never sat in the same fishing boat with Jesus. Brian McLaren and Bruce Cavey never sat around the camp fire on the beach and ate fish with Jesus. *Peter did all those things - for years*. And this is the same Peter who saw no reason to reject the accounts of God's wrath revealed against ungodliness in those Old Testament accounts. Peter accepts them fully. He holds them as powerful truth-teaching examples before the Church of Jesus Christ.

What I'm saying here is the Apostle Peter - who knew Jesus intimately - felt there was no *inconsistency* between the revelation of God in the Old Testament and the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Truth be told, we know exactly how Peter - this Peter who was intimately acquainted with the loving presence of Jesus - we know how *this* Peter viewed all of the writings of the Old Testament - *2 Peter 1:20-21 - "....knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. [21] For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."*

It hit me like a ton of bricks all over again this week as I read these familiar words. There is something burning in Peter's heart. Just look again - really consider - those first few words - *"....knowing this first of all...."* Here's the only starting place. Nothing else works in the whole Christian realm until you get this right. This is the *first thing* to get right.

Peter is saying there is a number one truth we need to know. He says **“no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation.”** He means people didn’t generate their own ideas according to the customs of their own culture. And this is **exactly** what **Greg Boyd and Brian Zahnd and Brian McLaren** are boldly saying. They pat each other on the back for the cleverness with which they say it. But Peter will have none of it. In fact, going even further, Peter says, **“...no prophecy was ever [not even once] produced by the will of man...”**

Peter says if this **number one truth** ever starts to fall into neglect or decay **absolutely nothing else good can be produced in terms of authentic Christian faith.** And this is **far** from the number one truth in these contemporary authors. The Holy Spirit must weep.

The church can and must whole-heartedly accept what **Peter** said and what **Moses** said and what **David** said and what **Jesus** said. None of their words require bleaching or cultural editing. And **progressive revelation**, properly understood doesn’t require it.

2) **RATHER THAN REMOVE THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE JUDGMENT AGAINST PERSISTENCE IN SIN PROGRESSIVE REVELATION INTENSIFIES IT**

Hebrews 10:29-30 - “How much **worse punishment**, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? [30] For we know him who said, ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay.’ And again, ‘The Lord will judge his people.’”

This is not complicated logic. The idea is willfully rejecting greater light and stronger grace automatically brings greater wrath. This is what one would certainly expect. With the unfolding of **progressive revelation** as God redemptively reveals more and more of His heart and pours out more costly manifestations of divine love the excuses for our rejection diminish. The wickedness of our hearts is more fully exposed.

Remember this. Redemptive **love** and deeper **judgment** aren’t **contradictory**. The first actually **creates** the second.

3) **WHEN THE HANDS OF A LOVING GOD ARE FEARFUL**

Hebrews 10:31 - “It is a **fearful thing** to fall into the hands of the living God.”

While the Bible consistently portrays God as merciful and loving, whenever it describes anyone **falling into His hand or hands** it is almost always a description of wrath and judgment.

Let me just wrap up with one of the best examples of how this phrase is used in **2 Samuel 24:11-15** - “And when David arose in the morning, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Gad, David’s seer, saying, [12] “Go and say to David, ‘Thus says the LORD, Three things I offer you. Choose one of them, that I may do it to you.’” [13] So Gad came to David and told him, and said to him, ‘Shall three years of famine come to you in your land? Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days’ pestilence in your land? Now consider, and decide what answer I shall return to him who sent me.’ [14] Then David said to Gad, ‘I am in great distress. Let us **fall into the hand of the LORD**, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man.’ [15] So **the LORD** sent a pestilence on Israel from the morning until the appointed time. And there died of the people from Dan to Beersheba 70,000 men.”

“Pastor Don, why are you telling all of this on a Sunday morning? Do you really think this helps make any of us feel good in this service?”

First of all, if I’m worth two cents to the Lord as a pastor, at all, I’m not primarily out to just make anyone feel good. I’m out to help people know the truth of God’s Word. I would simply refer you to the scathing words found in Jeremiah and Ezekiel from the Lord about prophets who make it their primary goal to make people feel good.

But secondly, and more importantly, I’m worried about the kind of gospel the church is starting to export to the world. There is a strong aversion to any mention of divine wrath and judgment. And my problem with that is it marks a departure from the gospel as it’s defined in the New Testament:

Romans 2:14-16 - “For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are

a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. [15] They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them [16] **on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.**"

Paul clearly states this coming day of divine judgment is an important part of his "***gospel***"(16). And this seemed to at least ***partially*** motivate Paul's gospel outreach: **2 Corinthians 5:10-11** - "**For we must all appear *before the judgment seat of Christ*, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. [11] Therefore, *knowing the fear of the Lord*, we persuade others....**"

Do we know anything of this gospel impulse? Do we fear leaving people with wrong ideas about God and judgment and redemption ***unpersuaded***? This world needs more than love sweet love. It needs deliverance from sin and the coming divine judgment. And it needs deliverance from a million false teachings about how redemption can happen. God help us to get it right. God help us to never forget it. And God help us to never be intimidated from proclaiming it.