

Hell and the gospel

Part 3 – To those who are troubled by God’s ferocious anger

To those who fear they’re going to be thrown into an ever-burning hell, there is good news: Christ’s mercy extends to the worst of sinners (Part 1). And to those who cry for justice on the unrepentant, arrogant, self-centred, uncaring, awful people they feel *should* be thrown into an ever-burning hell, there is also good news: Justice will be done. Christ doesn’t let anybody get away with anything. Every evil will be exposed and evil people go to hell (Part 2).

But is that it? We just leave all those evil people in hell screaming forever in the torment of their own stinking attitudes, while we live it up in the New Jerusalem experiencing nothing but joy?

For victims of terrible crimes, the answer might be a resounding and understandable “Absolutely yes; let them rot in hell forever,” but Jesus told a story in **Matthew 18** about the danger in that reaction. It’s a story, **verse 23**, about “a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants,” who discovered as he went through the accounts, **verse 24**, that one of his servants “owed him ten thousand talents,” which today would be millions of dollars.

It was an unforgivable crime; a servant of the crown draining the royal coffers to the tune of millions! How could anyone have dared do such a thing right under the king’s nose - and get away with it for so long? But this is a story, and Jesus is creating characters and exaggerated circumstances - like the gigantic amount of money owed - to get a point across. The point being so far, that the amount owing was so huge it **couldn’t** be paid back. It was a crime so great that there was nothing the man could do to make up for it.

The damage was done, the money was lost forever, and now the king would have to live with his loss for the rest of his life, like victims of any horrible crime have to do. In justifiable fury the king inflicts a “may-he-rot-in-hell” type penalty on the servant. “**Since he was not able to pay,**” **verse 25**, “**the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.**” Make the miserable little scumbag weasel pay for what he’s done, and pay dearly.

So in one pull of the king’s lever, the trapdoor opened and down into the worst hell possible the servant plunged, his wife and kids taken off to God knows where, and himself branded forever as a man not to be trusted.

The penalty was so severe it made the servant's knees buckle and he fell to the ground crying, "Be patient with me,' he begged," in **verse 26**, "and I will pay back everything." Which was ridiculous, of course, because on a paltry servant's wage how could he pay back millions? But amazingly, stupendously, **verse 27**, "The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go."

How long the man knelt there as he took in what the king said, Jesus doesn't say, but he does say what the man did next, right after leaving the king's throne room. He "went out," **verse 28**, "found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii," a few dollars - and he cancelled the debt, right? Not on your life. Instead, "He grabbed (his fellow servant) and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded."

The second servant also cried, "Be patient with me, and I will pay you back," **verse 29**, which he *could've* done on a servant's wage, but the first servant showed no pity at all and instead "had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt," **verse 30**.

The king, however, got wind of what the first servant had done and in a purple fury hauled him back to the palace, where he roared at him in **verse 32**, "You wicked servant, I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" And even more angry now, the king "turned him over to the jailers until he should pay back all he owed."

Jesus' point being? **Verse 35**, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." In other words, if all we care about is making people pay for what they've done, then we're in danger of God doling out the same treatment to us. To those who demand justice without mercy, therefore, there is a clear message here: If you want someone to rot in hell forever for what they've done, then don't be surprised if you find yourself rotting in hell with them.

But how can such a statement be justified? Surely justice demands due payment - and yes it does in the *first* part of the story, because the servant is about to pay dearly for his crime. But unlike a typical court case where a "Guilty" verdict results in a stiff sentence from the Judge and the guilty man's cries for mercy fall on deaf ears as he's dragged out of the courtroom, the king (or judge) in this story, picturing our heavenly Father (verse 35), has pity on the poor chap, calls him back into the room and says, "The charge against you has been dropped. You don't have to pay a penny of the millions you owe. You're free to go." And with a loud thud he bangs his gavel, accompanied by equally loud gasps of shock from all those in the courtroom.

Because it is shocking, isn't it? Not only is it shocking that God shows mercy to a cunning swindler who scams millions from his employer, it's just as shocking what God says to those who DON'T show mercy to such evil people.

Well, God had better explain himself because in the real world **we** live in the only way that really works with evil people is to lock them up in jail and keep them there for as long as their crime deserves. We'd scoff a Judge out of court if he told a swindler who'd scammed the life-savings out of thousands of Senior Citizens that he was forgiven and free to go. Because in our world mercy may be a nice idea, but in practice it doesn't stop crime. "Hit 'em where it hurts" is the only way, just as it was with Hitler.

And wasn't that how God dealt with Israel too? He tried the "softly, softly" approach but it blew up in his face, as we read in **Hosea 11:1-4** - "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But **the more I called Israel the further they went from me**. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them."

God tried the merciful, kind approach with Israel, but how did the Israelites respond? **Verse 5**: "Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because **they refuse to repent?**" For all God's tender care and kindness, the Israelites didn't change their attitude toward him at all. They were just like criminals today who show no remorse, no concern for the victims and no change in their attitude, no matter what you do to help them.

So, what did God do? He resorted to what today we'd call "capital punishment," **verse 6** - "Swords will flash in their cities, will destroy the bars of their gates and put an end to their plans." And because "My people are determined to turn from me," therefore, "Even if they call to the most High, he will by no means exalt them," **verse 7**. This time there's no mercy, not like Matthew 18. Instead, the Israelites can jolly well pay for what they've done, and pay dearly with a hellish mix of death and slavery.

And for those who believe justice demands due punishment and hardened criminals should be locked away forever, it appears at this point that God heartily agrees.

But the story in Hosea doesn't end there.

In **verse 8**, God's tone totally changes, and in anguish he cries, "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim?" Admah and Zeboiim were in the same disaster zone as Sodom and Gomorrah, which vividly describes the extent of the destruction God had in mind for Israel and Ephraim. It was total. Smoking ruins. Not a blade of grass left. So, yes, God was going to make Israel and Ephraim pay - and pay dearly for their stinking attitudes and thumbing their noses at him - but now we hear him say in **verses 8-9**, "**My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor devastate Ephraim again.**"

God surprises us yet again. First he shocks us with mercy on the scamming servant in Matthew 18, and now in Hosea it's his complete **about turn** in his attitude to Israel and Ephraim. But what makes this second story in Hosea even *more* remarkable is that God reverses his sentence on Ephraim and Israel BEFORE either of them show any signs of repentance. His heart goes out to them with compassion and mercy before they've shown any remorse or change of attitude. They haven't even begged for patience like the servant in Matthew 18 did.

So how on earth does God explain himself, as to why he, if he was the Judge in a court case, would let an unrepentant criminal go free - especially one who'd been yelling obscenities at the Jury and scoffing at the victims of his horrendous crimes - simply because he (the Judge) feels sorry for the man? Imagine a Judge trying that today with a serial killer who kidnaps innocent members of the public and sacrifices them to Satan. But in chapter **13:2** that's exactly what Israel **had** been doing: "**They offer human sacrifices.**" And God could be **merciful** to people like that? But how?

Well, God explains himself in one simple sentence, in the second part of **verse 9**, "**For I am God and not man.**" And he reminds us in **Isaiah 55:8** that "**my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.**" In fact, **verse 9**, "**As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts,**" which is all a bit humbling for anyone who thinks their own opinion on how criminals should be dealt with is the "last word" on the subject. It isn't the last word because GOD has a few things to say about dealing with criminals too, AND (more humbling still) it's on a whole different level of thinking than ours. In fact, it's so high above our thinking we can't fathom it out at all. It's totally beyond us!

But he does give us clues in how he dealt with Israel, which helps because the Israelites represent the worst people you can think of, all those dreadful people you know or read about who make your blood boil. The Israelites were exactly those kind of people, the ones you'd love to throw in jail, or hell, to rot in misery forever.

They made **God's** blood boil too, though, as we read in **Jeremiah 7:9**, where God yells at the Israelites, "**Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, AND THEN**" - even worse, **verse 10** - "**(you have the cheek to) come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, 'We are safe' - safe to do all these detestable things?**"

The Israelites were committing atrocious crimes and then going to the temple thinking the temple made them immune to penalty. That's like an ambassador of a foreign nation breaking all kinds of laws in his host country and claiming "diplomatic immunity." Or a Judge's son being hauled up in court expecting to be let off because his Dad's a Judge. This was "entitlement" of the worst kind, where people actually believe they've got the right to do whatever they want and not be punished for it.

So God lets them know in **verse 11**, “I have been watching!” Oh, he’s **fully** aware of their arrogance, hypocrisy and sham religion, just as he had to watch Christians steal, murder, rape and destroy people on their Crusades while claiming immunity and entitlement to such dastardly deeds because they were doing them “in God’s name.”

With the Israelites it was even worse though, **verse 13**, because “While you were doing all these things I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called but you did not answer.” God was constantly warning them to stop their evil ways, but they couldn’t care less what God had to say. Instead, they defended their actions, just like priests who abuse children today are defended by their church - to protect the church, without a care for the children who’ve been abused. So these were terrible crimes the Israelites were committing, and in direct rebellion against God himself too.

And what’s God’s first reaction? Is it, “Oh well, never mind, you’re forgiven?” Absolutely not, **verse 15**, “I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did to all your brothers, the people of Ephraim.” And in **verse 16**, “So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you.”

The Israelites have really done it this time. Their attitude is so arrogant and so atrocious that God says, “I don’t want anything to do with them and nor should you. Let them rot in hell.” So God isn’t against letting awful people stew in their own juice, without any access to charity-workers or rehabilitation, or a chance to apply for parole before their sentence is up. When people have the audacity (and stupidity) to “provoke me (God) to anger,” **verse 18** - because they won’t respond to correction or warning and prefer instead to “follow the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts,” **verse 24** - then the consequences from God are severe, **verse 20**: “My anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place, on man and beast, on the trees of the field and on the fruit of the ground, and it will burn and not be quenched.”

And some people would be very happy if that was the END of the story for such nasty people: “Let them languish in an ever-burning, unquenchable hell.” But in among these verses **lurks a surprise** that proves how different God’s thinking is to ours. In verse 18, God’s just got through explaining what the Israelites have been doing to provoke him to anger, but out of the blue he then asks in **verse 19**, “But am I the one they are provoking? Are they not rather harming themselves, to their own shame?”

That’s amazing! God had every right to be extremely angry at these awful people, but to him they weren’t just repulsive objects to be got rid of. Because in **his** eyes they were **already** rotting in hell. Their minds and attitudes were stuck in self-destruct mode, so that everything they did only dug them into their torment and troubles ever deeper - like people today who can’t stop spending money even when they’re in terrible debt.

God, therefore, didn’t hate these people.

But that's because he sees us humans through different eyes. He sees the hurt we inflict on ourselves and it makes his heart bleed. It's like watching your child self-destruct. He becomes miserable, uncommunicative and reclusive. He doesn't want help and he doesn't listen. You could shoot the child for being so stupid, but your heart just breaks for him as well. Such was God's reaction to Israel. No matter how terrible they were, or how much they rebelled against him, his heart would always break for them.

So that's three instances in Scripture in which we see God reacting in surprising ways to people who deserve to be thrown into hell. He's merciful to a scamming servant, his compassion is aroused even for those who refuse to repent, and he cares more about the Israelites hurting themselves than about his own feelings being hurt. To those who are troubled by God's anger, therefore - or have difficulty trying to explain God's ferocious anger to others - the good news is, **God's anger is not the end of the story.**

At first glance, though, it seems that God has to vent his wrath on us wretched humans and only then is his anger assuaged. But **in among** all those grim verses about his anger are hints of a God who thinks and acts in ways so very different to ours.

And that's what king David saw and sang about in **Psalms 103**. He could see God's amazing capacity for compassion, **verses 8-10**: "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, **nor will he harbour his anger forever**; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities." But HOW did David know all this about God? **Verse 7** - "He (God) made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel."

It was in all those stories of **how God dealt with Israel** that David understood God. He saw, **verse 6**, how "The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed" (as in saving Israel from Egypt). He also saw, **verse 15**, how "As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him" - AND when Israel DIDN'T fear him too (as we discovered in Hosea and Jeremiah). David also saw WHY God has so much compassion for us, "FOR," **verse 14**, "he knows how we are formed, he remembers that **we are dust.**"

God sees us as we are, helpless creatures with a terrible bent for self-destruction, and his heart goes out to us, even when we do terrible things to each other and to him, because **we are constantly creating a living hell for ourselves** that we are NEVER able to stop or get out of. And when David saw that amazing heart of God, he loved it so much he became a man after God's own heart himself. And God would love that to happen to us too. Remember what he said back in **Matthew 18:35**, about forgiving "from **your heart**"? He asks that of us because that's what HE does, and he'd love his children to share the same heart he has.

But if God loves us that much, where does hell fit in? Hell seems to be the opposite of love - **or is it?** Is there even love in hell?.... (continues in Part 4)