

SAINTS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD

A Devotional Meditation on Vayakhel (And He Assembled)

Exodus 35:1-38:20; 1 Kings 7:40-50
Psalm 2:1-12; Matthew 7:15-23; 1 Corinthians 10:1-14; Revelation 3:14-22

Albert J. McCarn
March 9, 2024

One advantage of a Christian education is learning the history of our faith. That was an advantage of the Christian education I received. What I learned of church history told the story of how our civilization got to where it is now. I was taught, for example, about the Great Awakenings of the 18th century in the American colonies, and how they set the colonies and the nation they formed on a course to incorporate godly principles into the fabric of our federal government. So many in our nation have forgotten this, or have never been taught it. Such is the condition of a nation that disregards righteousness and follows the script of Psalm 2:



A Philadelphia Anabaptist Immersion during a Storm, Pavel Petrovich Svinin, 1811-1813, [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/object/1984.100.1).

Why are the nations in an uproar,
and the peoples mutter vanity?
The kings of earth set themselves up
and rulers conspire together against *ADONAI*
and against His Anointed One:
“Let’s rip their chains apart,
and throw their ropes off us!”
He who sits in heaven laughs!
ADONAI mocks them.
So He will speak to them in His anger,
and terrify them in His fury:
“I have set up My king
upon Zion, My holy mountain.”

Psalm 2:1-6 TLV

Our Colonial ancestors became acquainted with the anger of the Holy God through fiery preachers like Jonathan Edwards. I learned about him in our Christian school, and read his famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” On reading it again recently, I was struck by the unambiguous tone Rev. Edwards projected in this call for sinners to repent. He struck that tone early in the sermon with statements like this:

The observation from the words that I would now insist upon is this.—“There is nothing that keeps wicked men at any one moment out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God.”*

He describes in no uncertain terms the eternal fate of those who refuse to repent and cast themselves on God’s saving mercy, which He opens to everyone through Messiah (Christ). So powerful was this word that a revival began in that church, resulting in lasting change in that generation.

We rejoice at stories like this of God’s moves in times past, and at what He is doing in the earth today. Who wouldn’t be glad to see the wicked transferred from death to life? But there is another level of meaning in Rev. Edwards’ fiery sermon, evident in words like these:

Yea, God is a great deal more angry with great numbers that are now on earth; yea, doubtless, with many that are now in this congregation, who it may be are at ease, than he is with many of those who are now in the flames of hell.

These words should have us squirming in our seats. To put it in Evangelical terms, we may have professed faith in Jesus Christ, but is there evidence that we are living for Him? To put it in a broader biblical context, could we be numbered today among the righteous, or would something in our thoughts, words, and deeds cast doubt on that?

This is why we get uncomfortable when we read these words from Messiah Yeshua:

“Watch out for false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruit. Grapes aren’t gathered from thorn bushes or figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree produces good fruit, but the rotten tree produces bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a rotten tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will recognize them by their fruit.

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord!’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in Your name, and drive out demons in Your name, and perform many miracles in Your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you. Get away from Me, you workers of lawlessness!’”

Matthew 7:15-23 TLV

We could argue about what Yeshua’s warning means for our eternal destinies, but let’s set that aside for the moment. Let’s consider instead the intersection of His words with the exhortation of Jonathan Edwards. Both wanted to see God’s people actually living as God’s people rather than resting comfortably on their status as members of God’s faith community. That kind of “pretend righteousness,” whether among the Jewish people Yeshua taught, or the Colonial Puritans of Edwards’ community, was the same as the lukewarmness of the Laodicean church that Yeshua warned would be spewed out of His

* Edwards, J. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God by Jonathan Edwards." Blue Letter Bible. Last Modified 1 May 2014. https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/edwards_jonathan/Sermons/Sinners.cfm

mouth. In fact, it's the same kind of false righteousness evident in our day, and in every generation extending back to the beginning.

Our connection through the ages to the saints and sinners of the past is what prompted Paul to write about the example of our Hebrew fathers in the wilderness. Although they were all redeemed out of Egypt and experienced God's saving wonders, "Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, for they were struck down in the desert." (1 Corinthians 10:5 TLV)

It's easy to accept this if the subject is someone like Korah, who led the rebellion against Moses. He was unquestionably wicked and deserved what happened. So, too, did the Ten Spies who led the people away from God's promises, and in doing so demonstrated hearts more inclined to take counsel of fear and earthly wisdom than the eternal reliability of God. It's more difficult when we realize that righteous people were also impacted by God's judgment on that whole disobedient generation, and they also did not enter the Promised Land. That would include people like Bezalel and Oholiab, men who demonstrated the outpouring of the Holy Spirit by using their gifts and abilities to build the Tabernacle.

We don't know how old Bezalel and Oholiab were when they came out of Egypt. They may have been teenagers, and therefore not subject to God's judgment that every man aged 20 and older would die in the desert. Let's assume, however, that they were of age. We can certainly assume the small army of artisans who worked with them included men and women over 20. Those were people who did the holy work of God at God's express invitation, and with the knowledge, skills, and abilities He had given them. They probably felt the exhilaration of the Spirit guiding their efforts, and rejoiced when the Shekinah glory of God fell on the Tabernacle. Yet, when pressed to choose God's promises or the counsel of the Ten Spies, they opted for what they could see and hear instead of what they knew in their spirits was true of the Creator. They started well, but they did not finish well, and could not walk into the fullness of what God intended for them.

What was true then is still true. Our God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, and neither does He take pleasure in the unfulfilled dreams He has of the righteous who fall short through ignorance, apathy, or even outright rebellion. This is the lesson we must take constantly to heart. It is good that we concern ourselves with sinners, but we should remember that the righteous may also fall into the hands of an angry God.