Hard Questions: God's Wrath

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[0:00] Good morning. This last weekend, we had the youth over for the second time this summer where we were talking about hard questions.

! You probably heard the announcement a month or so ago where we had done that before. We were asking questions that sometimes we're afraid to ask at church or we're afraid to ask because we don't know.
We're afraid of what the answers might hold or maybe unbelievers even come to us and ask us questions and we're nervous about it. And so we kind of shy away from some of these harder questions of the faith.
And so we've covered a number of subjects and I'd even encourage you to go and ask some of the youth what we've talked about over those couple times because it's been really encouraging times.
But a subject that we didn't cover that I thought maybe we could do today in Sunday school just for a one-week kind of deal is the idea of God's wrath.
And particularly his display of wrath towards the people of the land of Canaan when the Israelites were coming in and God was giving them the promised land. If you'd like to turn with me to Deuteronomy chapter 9 verse 3.
[1:06] We'll go ahead and read that. It's Deuteronomy chapter 9 beginning in verse 3.

Verse 3. Know therefore today that he who goes over before you as a consuming fire is the Lord your God.
He will destroy them and subdue them before you. So you shall drive them out and make them perish quickly as the Lord has promised you. Based on verses like that, I'm sure that many of us have heard the question that kind of follows.
How do you justify God annihilating entire nations of people in the Old Testament? How does that picture of God fit with the picture that we oftentimes paint of him as a good and loving and gracious heavenly father?
How do those jive? A lot of people want to kind of juxtapose the God of the Old Testament with the God of the New Testament. And they'll look at verses like that and say it just doesn't seem to go together.
[2:06] So where do we go with a question like that? Where do we start? Sometimes it's hard to know. And so today we're going to hopefully try to start on answering questions like that. Well, first of all, we need to talk definitions.

Definitions are so important for conversations like this. Because oftentimes we're coming from different perspectives with people. And we don't realize that our idea of something might not be the idea that they have of that same thing.
So it's important to clarify with people what exactly they mean. So to avoid miscommunication, there's one point of clarification that needs to be made about that question.
And it's this idea of what does our friend or our co-worker or our family member or our neighbor, what do they mean by the word annihilation? Like that's an important thing to kind of clarify is what do you mean by annihilation?
Because when we think of annihilation, when we think of annihilation of people, we often associate it with harm done to innocent people by others who have evil or selfish motives.
[3:06] It really, it usually carries negative ideas with it. Like if we hear about annihilation, we even sometimes associate that with like genocide or really evil things that go on in our world today. And so if someone asks us, how can we justify God acting in this way?

What they're really asking in all probability is how can you justify God committing evil acts? How can you justify God doing something so obviously unrighteous?

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And if God were in fact killing innocent people, then yes, we would agree with our friend in doubting God's goodness. No one is justified in killing innocent people. So the question is then, were the Canaanites actually innocent?
You see, before we can answer the initial question on the surface, how can we justify God wiping out nations of people? We need to answer the questions that maybe lie beneath the surface.
The questions that may really be fueling the debate. Those questions being summarized as how can anyone justify their God killing innocent people? How can anyone justify their God committing evil acts of genocide?
[4:14] If we try to justify God annihilating nations without first addressing the moral nature of God's actions, we'll be giving ground without even knowing it and feeding the incorrect assumption that God's annihilation of ancient Near Eastern people groups was in fact an evil act that somehow God can just do because he's God.

But that makes God out to be someone that he's not. And it makes us out to be simple-minded people who believe in a God who acts randomly and illogically.
We have to show our friend or our neighbor, whoever we're talking to, that the underlying assumption centering around God doing evil is faulty. It's off base. If we don't, they'll assume that we actually think God is justified in doing evil.
And that makes us look bad, but more importantly, that makes God look bad. So, is God killing innocent people? The simple answer from scripture is no.
In fact, God's killing of anyone would technically never be unjustified because man by nature is evil and God by nature is good. God is just then in putting to death man for his sin.
[5:23] I mean, think back to the flood in Genesis. It was for the very fact that every intention of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil continually that God determined to blot out man from the face of the earth.

So, man's sin leaves man guilty, not innocent. And because man is guilty, God is justified in killing man. In fact, in letting man live out his days on this earth, apart from his redeeming grace, God is being merciful to man.
So, how about the Canaanites? Just how evil were their thoughts and their actions? Just how justified was God in killing the people of these nations?
Well, listen to a description of their sinful practices, which God calls abominations, in Deuteronomy 18. God says in Deuteronomy 18, if you'd like to turn there, beginning in verse 9, he describes the people of Canaan.
In Deuteronomy 18, verse 9. When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations.
[6:34] There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes, or interprets omens or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead.

For whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord. And because of these abominations that the Lord your God is driving them out before you. And so obviously we see that the Canaanites were not innocent.
They had sinned grievously against the Lord, and they had blatantly done evil in spite of having God's law even written on their hearts. And for this reason, God is justified in wiping them from the face of the earth.
So we've kind of addressed this point of clarification. We've seen that a potential misunderstanding could arise when our friend thinks one thing about the word annihilation, but we understand it from a biblical perspective to mean something very different.
At the heart of that issue, they assume that annihilation means God's committing these really evil acts. But we assume that annihilation means that God is actually judging people for their sin and their rebellion against him.
[7:46] So definitions are really important. How dangerous it would be to not clarify the meaning of annihilation and lead an unbelieving friend to think that we agreed with him or her in thinking that God is justified in committing evil.

Just because we know what we mean and what we believe doesn't mean that our friend knows what we mean or what we believe. They might actually think that we believe God commits evil. So we need to talk definitions to ensure that they know what we mean and we know what they mean.

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So we've covered that point of clarification. Now we can actually begin to address the question properly. So there's no longer this possibility for a really loaded question that's asking us to justify God committing blatantly evil acts.
It's actually a much less provocative question now. The question really now is, how can we justify God wiping out evil nations? And that doesn't sound as much of a hard question anymore to answer.
In fact, I think that the Bible has a lot to say about how God does that. And so now it's more reasonable. It's actually something that God does in accord with his character. Whereas the initial question seemed out of line with God's character.
[8:56] So the initial question, that kind of makes me feel backed into a corner almost. I get nervous, like that's a really hard question. But the clarified question hopefully makes us feel more confident.

Hopefully we can say, I think I can answer that. I think I can answer why God would pour out his wrath on evil nations. And to do it, we just have to focus our attention on the three different peoples that are involved in this.
Focus on the Canaanites, and then on the Israelites, and then on God. So first, let's focus on the Canaanites. God poured out his wrath on them. In one sense, he poured out his wrath because they were in rebellion against him.
They were his enemies. They had chosen their sin. They had chosen to sin against God. And in doing so, they had brought condemnation upon themselves. In the same way, we are responsible for our actions.
And God will hold us responsible for our actions. Such is the case with the people of Canaan. God is holding them responsible for the sinful actions, the sinful choices that they had made.
[10:00] And so it's not as though God was just ready to pounce at their first act of sin. We actually see in Scripture that God has been incredibly patient with these people.

He's actually given them this ample opportunity to repent of their sins. He actually says to Abram, when he is promising to Abram that he's going to give him the promised land, he actually says to Abram that his descendants will return to the promised land to dwell in it 400 years later.
But they'd have to be in captivity for those 400 years. And during that time, they couldn't take possession of the land. They couldn't do it any sooner. Because Scripture says, In essence, meaning, it's not yet time for the Amorites to be judged.
They have more sinning to do. And so God was patient. He was long-suffering. In not judging the evil nations of the land of Canaan for several hundred years, God was giving them opportunity to repent.
I mean, that's who God is. That's part of his character. Listen to Jeremiah 19.7. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it.
[11:14] And if that nation concerning which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And God gives the reason for this. He gives the reason for why he will relent from these disasters.

In Ezekiel 33.11. As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.
So is this not the way that God has dealt with people throughout Scripture? Look at the people of Nineveh when we read the book of Jonah. Because God did not delight in the death of the wicked, he sent Jonah to call the people to repentance.
And when the people repented, Scripture says, And so God stays true to his word.
Jonah's then angry with this outcome. And he wants God to destroy the city. When he goes and he sits outside the city to see what would happen to it, God causes this plant to grow up to give him shade.
[12:17] And then when God causes the plant to wither, Jonah's angry for the plant. He doesn't want God to destroy the plant. He wants God to destroy the city. But don't destroy the plant.

And we see God's compassion even in his rebuke of Jonah. We see his compassion for the people of Nineveh. God says, In Genesis, we have another example of God's mercy for repentant people of foreign nations.
God is prepared to destroy all of Sodom. God says, And so the Lord did end up destroying the city.

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But he was prepared. If they repented, he was prepared to spare them. And so we see from these two examples in Genesis and in Jonah, that God is long-suffering with sinners.
That he's not eager to destroy the wicked. That he's not sitting there scheming, just chomping at the bit to get to sinners. But because the Canaanites continued in their sin, rebelling against God by their abominable acts, the Lord holds them responsible for their sin by his judgment of them.
[14:07] But it's not just the people of Canaan that we want to be concerned with. We also need to look at the people of Israel. God had determined to use the people of Israel in his redemptive purposes.

They were to be a great nation that displayed the glory of God. Turn with me also to Deuteronomy chapter 4. Deuteronomy chapter 4.
And we'll begin in verse 5. And we'll see how Israel was to be this great nation. This nation that displayed God's glory. That displayed a very unique God to the nations.
Deuteronomy 4 beginning in verse 5. See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who when they hear all these statutes will say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.
[15:09] For what great nation is there that has a God so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

And so the nations would look at Israel and say, What a great nation! And Israel would look to them and say, What a great God! And to be this great nation that displayed God's glory, Israel needed to have a place to live.
They needed a place to settle. They needed land. And so God determined to give them the land of Canaan. So that's another facet of why God wiped out the people of Canaan.
He did it to further his redemptive purposes for Israel. You see, God didn't just save Israel from Egypt and then leave them to their own doing. He saved them from Egypt and then he saved them to the promised land.
He was with them from Egypt through to the promised land. As one writer put it, As surely as Yahweh brought Israel out of Egypt, he will bring them into the land he has promised them.
[16:13] So God was even, in a sense, continuing the process of salvation from Egypt through the promised land. But there's a third element in the discussion. So it's not just that God is judging the rebellious nations, that he wipes out the people of Canaan.

And it's not just that he's saving his people from the hands of these nations, that he wipes out the land of Canaan. But it's also that God was doing it all for his glory.
God was doing it all for his glory. He was judging his enemies and saving his people for his glory. It's a theme that's woven throughout scripture. And it's actually the title of a book by a man named James Hamilton.
And the title is, God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment. God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment. In judging his enemies, God was saving his people.
And in saving his people, God was judging his enemies. And he was doing it all for his glory. In one sense, God cannot save without judging.
[17:17] And God does not judge without saving. That is definitive of who God is. Turn with me to Exodus chapter 34. And we'll see that that idea of judgment and salvation is integral to God's character.

Exodus 34. And we'll begin reading in verse 6. Now, if you know the background of Exodus 34, this is when Moses is given a glimpse of God's glory.
This is when God causes his glory to pass before Moses. And he proclaims his identity to Moses. He tells Moses, This is who I am. And so, starting in verse 6, the Lord says, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.
So, this is who God is. This is a summary of his character. And how can it be summarized? It can be summarized in terms of salvation and in terms of judgment.

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Salvation here shows God to be merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and great in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.
[18:49] So, that's Exodus 34, 6 through part of 7. But then judgment shows God to be the one who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the sons and on the sons of the sons, on the third and on the fourth generations.

And that's the second part of verse 7. So, this verse in Exodus 34, it's a summary of who God is. He's a God of salvation, and he's a God of judgment. And this verse is actually repeated throughout the Old Testament.
It's somewhat of the embodiment of who God is is carried throughout the Old Testament. I'm not going to read every verse, but I'll list them just to show how this description of God's character in Exodus 34 is quoted or it's alluded to, not just in like a few verses, kind of scattered, or a couple passages, but throughout the Old Testament.
We see it in Numbers 14, 18, Deuteronomy 5, 9 to 11, Isaiah 63, 7, Jeremiah 32, 18, Hosea 2, 19 to 20, Joel 2, 13, Jonah 4, 2, Micah 7, 18, and Nahum 1 to 2.
And so we see that this verse, it shows up in all those passages, either quoted or alluded to in some way, to point us back to, this is who God is. Who is the God of the Bible? He is a God of salvation, and he is a God of judgment.
[20:09] So when people ask us the question, how do you justify God annihilating entire nations of people in the Old Testament? They're really only addressing a small part of both God's purposes and God's character.

They're only addressing his judgment of the nations, but they're not addressing his salvation of his people, and they're missing the grand scheme of it all that is for his glory. So what's the short answer to our question?
How do we justify God annihilating entire nations of people in the Old Testament? We can say this. God was justified in annihilating the Canaanite nations because he is glorified in salvation through judgment.
In order to save his people and to bring them rest in the promised land, God judged the evil nations of the land who had rebelled against him. And this isn't the only time that God has acted in this manner.
This isn't the only time that God has judged in order to save for his glory. We have an opportunity when we're asked questions like this to present the gospel as well.
[21:14] We don't have to just stop with the people of Canaan and the people of Israel. Just as God judged the nations of Canaan in order to save the people of Israel, so too did God judge Jesus for our sin upon the cross in order that he might save those who repent and believe.

This was both his greatest act of judgment and his greatest act of salvation in which he most displayed his glory for all of us to see. And so as we wrap up, I just have some concluding thoughts, some kind of points of application or maybe just, I don't know, helpful tips or words of encouragement before we finish.
And I have seven of them that I just want to kind of briefly cover. So the first one is this. We ought to read and know our Bibles. Being a layperson doesn't exempt us from knowing our Bibles. Sometimes it might be a subconscious thing, but sometimes it's almost like, well, I'll leave it to the pastors. Like, I'll leave it to them. They can have all the answers. I'll just direct people to them. Like, well, come to church with me and we can get that question answered.
But in one sense, we need to be reading our Bibles and we need to be knowing our Bibles ourselves. I found that out when I began working at Menards. I had one of my coworkers, he came up to me and he had a hard question for me.
[22:32] And he said, after we discussed it for a while, that he asks every single Christian that works at Menards for him, he asks them that question. And that struck me. Like, this guy's not going up and saying, okay, well, first of all, are you qualified to answer this question?

Okay, if you're not qualified, don't worry about it. No, he comes up and he just asks. He doesn't say, like, let me make sure, you're like, are you a pastor or are you going into ministry or, no, like, he just straight asks it. So we need to know our Bibles because we're going to be asked questions like these.
Secondly, our faith should be reasonable, but that doesn't mean that our answers to tough questions are based on the foundation of reason. Our answers are based on the foundation of the

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Bible.
And praise God, the Bible is reasonable. So, we don't want to win people over with our convincing arguments at the expense of opening our Bibles with them. The Word of God holds the words of life, so we need to point people to it and the reasonableness of the words that it contains.
It's not irrational, the Bible's not unfounded, so we can have comfort in knowing that it's logical, that it's reasonable, because the God who gave us his word is logical and he's reasonable.
[23:42] All right, thirdly, being able to answer tough questions well doesn't save people. God saves people. But, as we see in the book of Acts, God used Paul's reasoning abilities as a means of bringing people to saving faith.

So, God uses our ability to reason from the scriptures in order to save people. But, we can't begin to think, if I just have a really convincing argument, I'll get this person saved.
That's not how it works. But, let me just tell you a little bit about Paul. Soon after Paul's conversion, scripture says that Paul began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues and it says that he was confounding the Jews by proving that Jesus was the Christ.
When he came to Jerusalem, Paul preached boldly in the name of the Lord and he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. Then when Paul came to Thessalonica on one of his missionary journeys, scripture says, he went into the synagogue of the Jews as was his custom and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead.
Scripture then says, and some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas. And so we see a living example of one who did not shy away from using his intellect and his reason to advance the gospel.
[25:04] Paul's ability to argue and to convince and to persuade was used by God as his chosen means in bringing people to salvation. Fourthly, we shouldn't be afraid to say, I don't know, let me get back to you.

It's far better to get back with someone later with an answer that has been well thought out, that you've dug into the scriptures, that you've asked family, friends, pastors. It's better to do that than to say something to someone that's incomplete or maybe incoherent or worst of all, incorrect.
We don't want to lead people astray and sometimes when we don't know, it's easy to just want to blurt out whatever comes to mind instead of saying, you know, let me get back to you. Let me swallow my pride and say, I'm not sure.
I'll have to get back to you on that. All right, and fifthly, when we enter into conversations like this, it's easy to make the goal changing the other person's mind and trying to convince them of our viewpoint and we want them in a good way, we want them to walk away with a grasp of the truth but sometimes that's a really lofty goal to see immediately happen and so maybe a more realistic goal to begin with, a goal that will motivate us to engage in hard conversations without saying, this is just over my head, it's too big, I'm just not going to go for it.
Maybe a goal that would help us, that would motivate us to do it is to desire that our friend would see that there's more to the picture than they saw before. Maybe it's even if we could just give them pause and make them say, hmm, I haven't thought about it like this before.
[26:32] Maybe that's something that we should try to shoot for. Maybe our conversations with them will lead them to question their convictions. Maybe our conversations with them will lead them to question their assumptions or their presuppositions about who God is or what the Bible is or what the Bible says or what we are as Christians.

Because a lot of people in this world, in America and even in our own communities, have very skewed and mistaken understandings of who God is because they don't know what his word actually says. I had a guy that I work with at Menards who thinks that the Bible mentions the word Muhammad.
And so, I mean, that's the worldview he's coming from. It's like, hey, you know, the Bible talks about Muhammad. Well, that's like, we really got to start from the basics now because like, I don't know if you really understand the Bible.
And so, we need to realize that we need to try to speak truth into their lives but not to try to get them to see everything perfectly right away.
All right, and then the sixth goal. The sixth goal is not to satisfy, our goal is not to satisfy our unbelieving friends at the expense of presenting truth.

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[27:39] Our goal is to present truth that people may have never heard accurately presented or considered in that light before. So, we shouldn't just want to please the itching ears of our friends.

We shouldn't want to just say what they want to hear. I mean, let's be honest, that's a real danger. Our flesh will long to be accepted. Satan will tempt us with the approval of man. But engaging in hard conversations is not about making us feel good about ourselves.
It's about sharing truth with others. At the same time, though, we shouldn't leave our friends unsatisfied because we don't know our Bibles. It's one thing for them to be unsatisfied because of the offensiveness of the Bible.
It's another thing for them to be unsatisfied because we can't even articulate the claims of the Bible.
And then seventh and last, we just examined a pretty lengthy, in-depth answer to a tough question. But I hope that we're not overwhelmed because answering tough questions doesn't have to be like a half-hour presentation that involves hours of preparation. In fact, hopefully, that's not what it looks like because right now we're in the context of Sunday school.
[28:42] But these hard conversations take place in the context of real-life relationships. And so hopefully, in those relationships, when we're answering hard questions, hopefully it takes place over many conversations.

Hopefully it takes place in conversations where we listen well and listen often, where we understand the perspective of our friends and our family, where we don't just speak at them for 45 minutes, but where we talk with them, inviting them into our homes, inviting them into our lives with our Bibles open and our hearts eager to gently but boldly and unashamedly point them to the truth about Jesus.
Let's pray as we close. Heavenly Father, we thank you once again for your word. We thank you that it does contain the words of eternal life and that by them we can know you and be saved.
And so God, I pray that you would give us boldness and that you would give us clarity, that you would give us endurance in the race, that we might desire to engage with unbelievers, to engage with those who live around us in such a way that points them to the gospel, that they see Jesus more clearly, not just by the way that we live, but even by the way that we speak and by the way that we speak of your word.
And so God, give us a high view of your word and cause us to want to be in it and to know it and to cherish it. And it's all for your glory and for the fame of your name.
[30:10] It's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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