

UNEDITED DRAFT

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We all know what tension feels like, don't we? Tension is created when someone is pulled in two different directions.

- Time home vs time at work
- Get the newer more reliable car vs save money by going cheaper
- Getting work done around the house vs feeling the need to relax
- Giving to this cause vs giving to that cause
- Making my kids happy vs spoiling them

Life is full of tensions we are often pulled in two or more directions, and when that happens we feel the strain. Tension in and of itself is not a bad or evil thing. Sometimes wrestling with a tension and working toward resolution reveals what we consider most important. Tension can draw us closer in our relationships with others as we resolve tension with them and for them.

And the reason I stress that tension itself is not bad is because the main focus of the message today is to consider a tension that exists in God himself. It sounds strange to say it, but the Bible does describe God has having a tension within him. God is pulled in two different directions. It's important for us to understand this tension that exists within God, otherwise we won't understand the nature of God. We won't understand the heart of God. We won't understand the need or the reason for the extreme rescue plan God put together for you and me.

Let me just lay out the tension, and then we'll discuss it further. There are a number of ways to describe it. You'll see the message title says the tension is judgment vs grace. You could also say it is. Holiness vs compassion. Or you could say justice vs mercy. These are all ways of saying the same thing. There are two absolute and uncompromising truths about God's nature. God is absolutely holy and just and true, and so he must judge and condemn all sin and rebellion against him. Yet God is also gracious, loving, merciful and compassionate, and so his nature compels him to love and forgive, encourage and give.

At first glance it seems one must preclude the other. (Can you imagine a judge who is known for both justice and mercy?) So inside of God there is this tension. How does this tension resolve?

When you know the answer, you will know God's attitude and heart for you.

If you don't understand God's tension, you will believe that God falls on one side or the other of these seemingly opposing concepts. Let's turn to Scripture and study God's tension:

Judges 10:6-16

Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines. And because the Israelites forsook the LORD and no longer served him, he became angry with them.

Let's pause there and make sure we fully comprehend the full wickedness of Israel, and the greatness of their apostasy. You know how you have bad days... and then you have REALLY bad days. A bad day is when you tell your wife, "Yeah, I spilled coffee on my shirt half an hour after I got to work, and went the whole day with this stain that everyone was noticing." But a really bad day is when you tell your wife: "Got a coffee stain, and that was just the start. My performance

review was poor. On my way for lunch I tripped on the stairs and sprained my knee. On my way home from work, I got a flat tire. A truck splashed me while I was changing it. Angry about that, I wasn't watching my speed and I got pulled over and got a speeding ticket." Now that's a *really* bad day!

As the wickedness of Israel is described here, they're not just wicked, they are *really* wicked! They didn't just fall into occasional worship of a false god, they were whole heartedly into worshipping multiple gods from all the nations around them. The gods of Aram, Moab, Ammonites, Philistines. Look on a map and you'll see that Israel was chasing the gods of every nation around them. They were rejecting the one true God as they jumped into bed with every other god that came along.

The result? "God was angry with them!" At first glance we might smugly say, "At least I'm not that wicked. They were really wicked, I just occasionally mess up. At least I don't worship foreign gods! I worship the one true God!"

While open idolatry may not be a huge problem among us (any Baal worshippers out there?), secret idolatry certainly is. By secret I don't mean we are hiding our idols from others, but we hide in the closet and worship them when no one is looking. By secret, I mean these idols are hidden in our heart where no one can see. In fact, we may not even fully acknowledge or admit to ourselves that the idols are there.

Israel looked to the foreign gods **for help, and blessing, and direction, and purpose**. Where do you look for those things? When bad times come, **to whom do you turn for help?** (By that I mean whom do you rely upon? Who do you trust will come to your aid?)

- To a family member or friend?
- To your bank account or credit card?
- To a "professional" (doctor, lawyer, plumber,
- Or do you turn to God, believing that your help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth... and then, after that, turn to the help God provides through family members or material resources or professionals? Upon whom have you built your trust?

To whom do you turn **for blessing (that is, happiness)?**

- To a family member or friend?
- To your work and fulfillment you get by working there?
- To your bank account or credit card?
- To leisure and hobbies?
- To a "professional" (a counselor,
- Or do you turn to God, believing that blessings and happiness ultimately come from him, and that he often chooses to provide happiness through family members/friends or material resources or professionals or hobbies? Upon whom have you built your trust?

To whom do you turn **for direction?**

- To a family member or friend?
- To your bank account or credit card?
- To a "professional" (a counselor, financial advisor, self-help book)
- Or do you turn to God, believing that direction ultimately comes from him and his Word, and that he often chooses to provide direction through family members/friends and books and the like? Upon whom have you built your trust?

To whom do you turn **for purpose?**

- To a family member or friend?
- To your bank account or financial means?

- To work and your sense of identity ads
- To a “professional” (a counselor, self-help book)
- Or do you turn to God, believing that purpose ultimately comes from him and our connection to him. He is our real identity. He gives true meaning for our life. He often gives fellow Christians to help us see our purpose in life, and books and the like. Upon whom have you built your trust?

In short, honestly evaluate where idolatry has crept into your life. Understand that God in his justice is greatly angered where our trust rests upon things other than him. God’s anger cannot be denied as we hear God’s reaction the sins of the Israelites. God doesn’t just stew when he gets angry. He acts. **He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites, who that year shattered and crushed them. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites. The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah, Benjamin and the house of Ephraim; and Israel was in great distress.**

Life apart from the Creator will ultimately not be a pleasant life. This is certainly true in eternity if it is spent in hell. But God in love sometimes gives a glimpse of that in this life too. Apart from him there can ultimately be no happiness. God, when he allows us to suffer this way, not only is responding in judgment, but also in love. The trials are what lead us to recognize that he is in control. That he is our God, and life is all about him, and knowing him, and being in a loving, trusting relationship with him.

Now listen, this next part is interesting:

Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD, “We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals.” The LORD replied, “When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands? But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!” But the Israelites said to the LORD, “We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now.” Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the LORD.

God reminds them of his faithfulness, and their obstinate return to sin and rebellion. Time and again they called to him for help. Time and again he rescued them. Time and again they went right back to rebellion against God.

At first glance, God’s reaction surprises us. They seem to repent and ask God for help, and he says, “No! I will no longer save you!” Wait, that’s not what God’s supposed to say! God always saves us, doesn’t he?

The text gives us a clue to what is happening. When God says he will not save them, then Israel once again turns to the Lord and again confessed their sin. But this time it says, “Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the Lord.

Remember last week when we were talking about repentance we said that repentance is a turning from sin, to God; from death to God who gives life; from wickedness to God who grants full forgiveness; from folly to wisdom. In God alone do we find rescue, forgiveness and life. Trusting in him the gifts he offers become ours personally. When a person repents he enters into a relationship of trust with God, and God takes responsibility for our sin. Where trust in God is absent, then there is no true repentance. The person isn’t truly turned around.

So with all of this in mind, here’s what the Israelites were doing. They were sinning (turned away from “God.”) But they were suffering and they didn’t like that. Rather than turning around and having a trusting relationship with God, they only “looked back” at God. They kept their false

gods even as they asked the true God for help. “God, we don’t want to turn around. But we sure do want your help! We know our trust in these false gods is wrong, but we’re not going to turn from them to you. Instead, we’re looking back to you for help, but we’re just going to continue on this direction that we like. Would you help us?”

God said, “No way! Enough is enough! I will no longer save you. You are using me, not trusting me!”

Have you been guilty of using God? Sometimes I think we operate with the notion that God is incredibly naïve and hopelessly soft. We practice a bomb-shelter religion. We go to God when times are tough... when the bombs start falling in our lives. Then when the all clear signal is good and the difficult times have mostly passed, we come out of the bomb-shelter and get along with our lives without a real day-to-day reliance upon God. Then, when the needs arise again, I drop a token act of repentance, or show up in church a bit more frequently... hoping that God will then give me what I need (or want.)

Friends, God is not a vending machine. You don’t give God a little when you need something in return from him. Know the religion game... follow a few rules and God will spit out what you need at the proper time.

Please know that our God is righteous and holy, and if that is our view of him, then you can expect that sooner or later he will correct your misunderstanding. He will crush this idol that we worship, thinking it’s the true God, and he will show us how wrong we are. God in justice and love does sometimes say to human beings, “I will not save you any longer!” He gives us a foretaste in time what will be true in eternity if we continue to forsake him for gods of our own invention.

Understand that there certainly is a prodigal son (or lost son) like the one we heard in the Gospel lesson today, and God welcomes back that son with open arms. But then there is son who looks for security and peace everywhere, only coming back to God occasionally when what is needed can’t be found elsewhere. To such a person, God says, “I will not save you any longer!”

Rely upon God always. Rely upon God first. He is your God, and none other. Confess to God your misplaced trust and your idols and your insincerity. Truly turn from sin and turn to him. But will he save? Will he forgive?

Listen:

“And he could bear Israel’s misery no longer.” Thank God for the tension that is in him. For he is not only a just and holy God, for if that’s all he were, then we all would have perished eternally long ago. God is also a God of love and mercy. And he shows it in this last verse of the text. God could bear Israel’s misery no longer.

Some would say, “Because Israel now sincerely repented from the heart, God saved them.” No. That’s not the reason given for God’s salvation and rescue. The reason is this: God could bear Israel’s misery no longer. Because of what was in him, not because of what was in them, God saved them! Their changed hearts did not move him to rescue them. His heart of love and compassion moved him to rescue them.

This is important! Listen: Our hope does not rest in the sincerity of our repentance, but in the intensity of the Lord’s compassion. ‘How do you know you are saved? Because I truly repented from the heart!’ This is a false statement. How do you know you are saved? Because God cannot stand to see his people crushed ... even though they are sinful and they deserve it!

He SO can’t stand to see them crushed that he went to incredible lengths to resolve this tension that is in him. He so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. At the cross of Christ the justice of God and the compassion of God met each other and were fully and completely resolved!

We must understand the tension that is in God. Some mistakenly view God purely as a God of compassion and mercy. They take his love for granted, misunderstand the severity of sin, and will often practice bomb-shelter religion. I'll go to God when I need something, and I know he'll always give it. Others go to the other extreme. They have a lively sense of God's severity, and understand little of his loving kindness. They live in fear and in despair imagining that God could not possibly forgive them, but they'll continue trying to be more deserving of it. But the truth we must believe is this: God is just and holy, so sin is absolutely serious... rebellion of God is something God gets furious about. But God is also merciful and compassionate. This tension is what moved God to do the unimaginable: He sent his Son to live for you the holy life he requires. He sent his son to die for you on a cross so that his uncompromising justice would be appeased.

During the rest of this season of Lent, continue to ponder this tension as you follow Jesus. Look for the tension of God's justice and God's mercy. His necessity to judge, but his compulsion to show grace. Feel the tension, and then with a new point of view rejoice in the resolution of that tension at the cross and then at the empty tomb. Tension relieved! God is good. Amen.