

I Came to Cast Fire

Introduction

The Text

⁴⁹ “I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! ⁵¹ Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. ⁵² For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. ⁵³ They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

⁵⁴ He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, ‘A shower is coming.’ And so it happens. ⁵⁵ And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat,’ and it happens. ⁵⁶ You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

⁵⁷ “And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? ⁵⁸ As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. ⁵⁹ I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.” (Luke 12:49–59)

An Unpopular Notion

- A. There has perhaps never been a day in which the idea of judgement has been more unpopular out in the culture at large than it is today here in America. The idea that anyone, whether another person or even God Himself would dare stand in judgment over us is a detestable notion to us.
- B. That is the spirit of our age, I’m well aware. And yet our text for this morning refuses to play ball. In these verses, Jesus is pressing us to deal with this idea of the judgment of God—in particular, the judgment of God that is awaiting every human being at the second coming of Christ.
 - 1. Drawing from our text, there are four observations I wish to make about this coming judgment of God in Christ: (1) It Is Desirable; (2) It Is Divisive; (3) It Is Dire; and (4) It Is Delayed.

(1) It Is Desirable (v. 49)

Talking about Judgment

- A. There is, perhaps, nothing more counter-cultural I could say at this point than that this judgment of God in Christ is, in fact, desirable, a good thing, something we ought to long for.
 - 1. I do hope to show you why this is the case in a moment, but I feel the first thing I must do, however briefly, is make the case that Jesus, here in [v. 49](#), is actually referring to the idea of His coming judgment in the first place.

- B. Look again at the statement itself: “I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!” (v. 49). Jesus is speaking of having come “to cast fire on the earth” and the question is: To what is this referring?
1. There have been various interpretations of these words. I for one, obviously, am taking them as a reference to the last day judgment. This is in particular due to both the context of this statement and the imagery invoked within it.
- C. Contextually, this statement is surrounded on either side with discussion of the second coming judgment. We saw last week this very idea in vv. 35-48. And we shall see that this also is the clear concern of vv. 54-59.
- D. Regarding the imagery invoked here—that of fire—it is important to note that everywhere else this image appears in Luke (except for one instance where it is referring to a literal campfire) it is referring to the coming judgment, the eschatological, or last day, judgment of God in Christ.
1. Consider what John the Baptist says of Jesus in Luke 3:17: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”
 2. Or consider Jesus’ own words in Luke 17:29-30: “²⁹ [O]n the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all—³⁰ so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed.”
- E. So the context and the imagery seem to clearly point to the fact that the coming judgment of God is in view here.

Desiring It?!

- A. But now, here is where things get particularly interesting. Jesus, back in v. 49, is talking about how much He’s longing for that day to come. Did you catch it? “I came to cast fire on the earth, and would [Gk. *thelo* = I wish, I want, I desire] that it were already kindled!” (v. 49).
- B. We read of Jesus’ desire to cast fire on the earth in judgment here and we are, perhaps, initially troubled. That doesn’t sound like the Jesus I know, or the God I know for that matter.
1. I thought Jesus said in John 3:17: “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” That’s the verse I have on my coffee mug. I don’t think I like Luke 12:49 much. No one’s putting that on the bottom of In’n’Out soda cups.
 2. I thought God said in Exo 34:6 that He is “slow to anger” and in Ezek 33:11 that He has “no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.”
 - a. So what’s all this talk about desiring to cast fire? Is Jesus breaking protocol here? Is this a momentary lapse of sin in an otherwise perfect life?

- C. Certainly not! What we come to see, upon closer examination, is that [v. 49](#) is not contradicting what we know of the mercy-heart of God. It is simply highlighting a different aspect of it. It is giving us a complementary perspective on it.
 - 1. Jesus here is not denying that He desires for none to perish and for all to be saved. But He is saying, rather, that He longs for the day when all unrepentant and rampant evil in the world will be done away with. He is here, you could say, expressing His desire for all the wrong of this world to finally and fully be made right.
 - a. God's judgment is not at odds with His goodness and love, but is, in fact, an expression of it.

The Good News of God's Coming Judgement

- A. We so often miss the good news piece of God's coming judgment.
 - 1. Paul himself actually explicitly brings the two together for us in [Rom 2:16](#) where he writes of the coming "[day when, according to my gospel, God \[will judge\] the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.](#)" It is a part of my gospel, a part of my good news, that God will judge the world.
- B. Is that how you think of it? We read the harsh words of the Bible, of men being thrown into the lake of fire and things of that sort, and we think it rather brutal and unsettling, and, even bad. But since when is justice a bad thing? I suppose it depends on which side of justice we are on.
 - 1. If we are the wicked, the unrepentant, the rebellious, well, then it is no good news for us.
 - 2. But if we are those who have been waiting for the vindication of our God and the overthrow of the evil one's dominion in this world and the swift end of all oppression and unrighteousness, well then the day of judgment shall be the greatest day in all the world for us.
- C. In [Gen 15:13-14](#), God tells Abraham that the people who will come forth from him will end up in bondage there in Egypt, "[and they will be afflicted for four hundred years](#)" (v. 13b). "[But \[He says\] I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions](#)" (v. 14).
 - 1. I bring this up to make the point: Judgment on the oppressor, the God-hater, the evil, is redemption for the children of God. The Exodus of Israel from Egypt, that climactic event held out by both Old and New Testaments as the very emblem of redemption, is itself, on the other side of the coin, judgment on evil and the powers of darkness.
 - a. Judgment and redemption go hand in hand. To put it another way: Heaven would not be heaven, if evil and sin were still permitted there.
- D. Last week, if you were here, you may recall we came up against some hard words there in [vv. 46-48](#), in particular. Though we were not able to deal sufficiently with them all, we did look at [v. 46](#) in more detail with its idea of Jesus coming like a master of a house and cutting into pieces (or cutting in two) that servant of His who had rebelled against Him and exploited those He had put under their care.

1. I mentioned at the time that statements as harsh as these concerning God's judgment, well they often make us a bit uncomfortable and in our weaker moments these are the sorts of verses we wish we could strike out of our Bibles. They seem to us a bit of an embarrassment to our faith. God appears mean, vindictive, even masochistic.
- E. But as I reflected on these things I realized that if I have such a sentiment concerning the judgment of God on evil in this way it actually says more about me than anything else.
1. If I do not long for God to come in judgment, if I think God rather harsh for talking like this and wish He wouldn't, well, then I betray the fact, I think, that I must not have yet brushed up against much of the world's evil and, hence, I have a very insufficient estimation of it.
 - a. If your life has been relatively peaceful and easygoing to this point, if people have been, rough around the edges to be sure, but kind to you on the whole, well, then surely you will be tempted to see God's talk of judgment on evil with the fires of hell as quite extreme and shocking and a bit embarrassing. You wish you could remove or at least downplay this part of the Bible's teaching.
 - b. But if you have been victim to the sorts of evils that so many in this world have—whether physical abuse, or rape, or molestation, or betrayal, or theft, or murder, or fill in the blank with your own horror stories—well, then I think the only way you can stay sane in the midst of this chaos is to settle your hope in the coming of Christ whereby all the evil done to you shall be made right.
- F. I mean, think of it like this: If an aggressive, lustful crowd of men were surrounding my house, something like happened with Lot in Sodom, and they were calling for me to bring my daughters out that they might rape and have their fill with them. If they're kicking at my door and breaking my windows and making their way inside with me and my girls locked up in the back bedroom, afraid for our lives . . .
1. Tell me, is not the sound of police sirens off in the distance, growing louder with every second, as the cops are making their way towards your house, is that not the sound of salvation?!
 - a. When you have brushed up against real, legitimate, life-shattering evil, you are not embarrassed of the judgment of God, you desire it. "Make all the wrong right, God! Only You can do it!"
- G. The illustration I just gave is really not all that different from the situation Jesus is describing in the parable we read last week in [vv. 42-48](#). Okay, God is going to come and cut a guy in two. But who is this guy? It's the guy who He'd put as manager of His house and charged him with caring for all the others living with him. But, instead of doing as God had asked, this manager took all the food and drink for himself, and he proceed to beat and whip the other servants and enlist them into his own service. Exploitation, abuse, victimization.
1. Listen to me. If you're the servants who are being beaten and whipped, not fed and not cared for, the arrival of the master of the house and his subsequent judgment on the

manager who was doing you horribly wrong, is not bad news, it's the best of news. It's gospel! There is a righteous judge, not swayed by bribery or conceit. And He will set the scales of the universe right.

- H. Listen to Leon Morris on this: "The Christian view of judgment means that history moves to a goal. . . . Judgment protects the idea of the triumph of God and of good. It is unthinkable that the present conflict between good and evil should last throughout eternity. Judgment means that evil will be disposed of authoritatively, decisively, finally. Judgment means that in the end God's will will be perfectly done" (as quoted by Packer in *Knowing God*, p. 144).

1. And that's why, I think, Jesus, in [v. 49](#), is desiring it. It's not a breaking of protocol. It's an expression of love. He wants to put an end to the injustice and the wickedness of this place. That certainly is the ultimate reason He has come.

We All Desire It

- A. I should say that, whether you are a Christian or not, whether you would admit it or not, whether you are even aware of it or not, you too long for this day just as much as Jesus does.
1. This is important to consider. I'll give you two pieces of evidence that support my claim: (1) The stories we tell; (2) The reactions we have.

(1) The Stories We Tell

- A. Listen, cards on the table, I am not a comic-book movie fan, but who can deny the massive appeal these things have in our culture? It seems to me to be the same basic storyline recycled, repackaged again and again and we're buying it, we're loving it. So they're bringing out characters I didn't even know existed—ant-man, wasp woman or whatever? Listen, back in the day as a kid I had comic book underpants. I was into it, but I have never heard of these characters until now. They're just dusting off all this stuff from the archives and bringing it out because we're buying, we're loving it.
1. But why? I remember one pastor commenting on how unexpected this sort of appeal is, when you stop and think about it. In our rationalistic, scientific, enlightened culture, why in the world are we so drawn to these fairy tale, comic book, childish kind of things?
- B. Well, what's the recycled and repackaged storyline here? Simply put: there's a good guy, a bad guy, the bad guy gets some sort of power source and begins to use it for selfish gain, the good guy through a great struggle gets it back and does away with the bad guy and all the evil he was doing, and everything is right in the world.
1. It's the same basic story, but we're drawn to it because it touches something deeper in us—the desire that we all have for evil and brokenness to be done away with, for righteous judgment.
 - a. If Superman just kind of shakes hands at the end of the movie with Lex Luthor, "Let's call it a truce", and then the credits start rolling. That's not a happy ending.

We want judgment on evil. We want it to be done away with. We long for that. That's why we want to see it on the screen. It gives us hope.

(2) The Reactions We Have

- A. With this all I want for us to do is consider the reactions people, Christian or not, have towards injustice in their own lives. Certainly there's a whole spectrum of response but every one of them at bottom is really just a crying out for judgment.
 - 1. When person is hurt by another and starts to nurse bitterness and unforgiveness towards them, there's a longing in that for judgment. "You can't just do this to me. You should pay for what you've done."
 - 2. Some will give the cold shoulder or the silent treatment.
 - 3. Others will lash back to try to make them hurt like they've been hurt. They long for vengeance.
 - 4. Some even kill.
 - a. The spectrum runs from cold to hot, from passive to aggressive, but the desire at bottom is the same: "I want judgment for the evil done to me." Certainly, taking matters into our own hands is not the right way to get it, we only add to the problem, but it proves we are longing for it nonetheless.
- B. If I could summarize what we have seen thus far, I might put it like this: All men and women, deep down, want a God who judges, they just don't want a God who has the audacity to judge them. And that leads to the next point.

(2) It Is Divisive (vv. 51-53)

- A. Jesus goes on to say in v. 51: "Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." And then He goes on to describe how His message and ministry will divide households, even families—father at odds with son, mother at odds with daughter.
 - 1. What tragic words are these? They again seem to rub us wrong on first read, do they not? I thought we just got done with Christmas. What is it that the angels are singing over the stable? "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace . . ." (Luke 2:14). And now You're here talking about division?
 - a. Well, as with v. 49, so too here as well. What we have here is not a contradiction of love, but yet another expression of it.
- B. No doubt Jesus has come to bring peace on earth in an ultimate sense, but getting there is going to be quite the ride.
 - 1. Because He's going to have to talk to us about our sin. Not their sin. Not the sin of Roman or Gentile or Pagan. Not my parents' sin. Not my spouse's sin. Not my enemy's sin. But my own. I am part of the problem that He needs to come and fix. I am part of the wrong that He needs to come and right.

- a. Because He loves us, He's going to have to tell us the truth—He's going to have to tell us that the fire of God's wrath is not just set to fall on those over there. It's set to fall on us, unless something changes in a hurry.
- C. And so this message will divide.
 - 1. Some, by sovereign grace, will have their eyes opened to their sin and their great need for salvation and they will repent, believe, and follow.
 - 2. But others, in the hardness of their heart, will refuse to entertain such self-humiliating thoughts. "I am not the problem. How dare you insinuate such a thing of me. I don't need a Savior. I need a Judge. One who will come and make them pay."
- D. But Jesus would say to any of us who might be in that place: "You're not reading it right. You're not hearing Me. You're not seeing reality." So He goes on.

(3) It Is Dire (vv. 54-59)

- A. In [vv. 54-59](#) we first see that Jesus is rebuking his listeners for the fact that they are able to read the weather and respond accordingly and yet they are totally missing the sign of the times.
 - 1. What He is getting at is that with His arrival in history, the world has been thrown into dire straits as it were, the last days are upon us and things are moving towards the last day, judgment day. And yet, so many seem unresponsive, uninterested.
- B. We often refer to talking about the weather as the more superficial kind of conversation and I suppose in a way that is essentially what Jesus is getting at here. You know how to read and respond to the weather, superficial mundane realities.
 - 1. But when it comes to the matters of your soul, of eternity, of your status before a holy God, of your need for repentance and forgiveness, you haven't a clue.
- C. And with the little parable he tells there in [vv. 58-59](#) he cuts to the chase: "⁵⁸ As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. ⁵⁹ I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny."
- 1. The basic sense of His words here is this: "Regardless of what you think about yourself and your righteousness, I assure you, you are on the wrong side of the law and the Judge of all the earth is coming. Let's try to settle this thing outside of court before it's too late."
- D. Now, it may be that, even this morning, there are some among us who's hearts are being softened and eyes are being opened.
 - 1. You came in thinking that what you needed most was a Judge—someone to bring the law down on those who have sinned against you.

2. Now you are realizing that what you need first and foremost is a Savior—because you yourself have sinned against a holy God. “I want to settle this thing outside of court, before the judgement and the fire. How do I do that?!”
- E. Well, now we are ready to look back up at that amazing verse I skipped past earlier. And here we come to the fourth and final observation, that this judgment, by the grace of God, has been delayed.

(4) It Is Delayed (v. 50)

- A. We’ve already seen clearly back up in v. 49 is Jesus expressing His desire to bring in the last day judgment and make all the wrong in the world right. So the question is, why hasn’t it already come? What’s holding Him back? What’s the delay?
1. Well, that is precisely what v. 50 goes on to answer. Look at the flow of thought there now: “⁴⁹ I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!⁵⁰ I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!”
- B. We know from other texts like Mark 10:38 that Jesus, with this idea of His “baptism” here, referring to His death on the cross.
1. Certainly He is not referring to His baptism by John in the Jordan river, for that had already taken place. No! He is referring to what that baptism in the Jordan ultimately signified: His solidarity with sinners and His willingness to go down into the belly of death itself on our behalf.
 - a. What an image we have here! For on the cross He is baptized not in mere water, but in the full fury, even the holy fire, we could say, of God’s righteous wrath against sin. There at Golgotha He will be immersed, as it were, plunged, baptized into the anger God, though He Himself had done no wrong.
- C. No wonder He says here: “[H]ow great is my distress.”
1. With this word “distress” we see Him there in Gethsemane, don’t we? In agony, sweating drops of blood, down on His face: “Father, if there is any other way, let this cup pass!”
 2. With this word “distress” we hear Him screaming out from the cross, don’t we? “My God my God why have you forsaken me?”
 3. With this word “distress”, brothers and sisters, we discover the way of our deliverance. Our deliverance comes at the cost of His great distress.
- D. Here is how the sinner can settle accounts with God outside of court. Jesus goes into the courtroom for us and negotiates on our behalf. He lets the mallet of God’s justice drive the nails through His own hands and feet. “Guilty as charged.” He pays back our infinite debt, to “the very last penny” (v. 59).
- E. And then with His final breath, He cries out, do you remember: “It is finished” [or, it’s the same Greek word as in our text, teleo: “It is accomplished”] (John 19:30). “I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!” (v. 50).

1. Well, brothers and sisters, He has done it. And in so doing, not only has He delayed the day of judgment, He has also made a way for that day of judgment to be, not bad, but good news for us.
 - a. He took our sin, we get His righteousness. He took our debt, we get His reward. He took our death, we get His life.
- F. But His payment, this settlement, is not automatically applied to our account. We must repent and receive it, receive Him, by faith. O I pray if you haven't already that you would do so today, and if you already have that you would continue to do so in increasingly deeper and deeper ways.