
God's Love and Will

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 28 December 2025

Isaiah 63:7-9 • Matthew 2:13-23



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

The Bible is the word of God. It is God's revelation of himself. Outside of personal, miraculous revelation, there is no other source of information for us, if we want to know the true nature of God. Reading the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New, reveals God to us. It is important to emphasise this. No part of it can be discarded or ignored, even if we sometimes want to. Many people only want to consider the New Testament, with its soothing and mostly peaceful telling of the story of Jesus Christ. But not all is peaceful and soothing, just as not everything in our lives is peaceful and soothing. And so we have to look at both Testaments in seeking to know our God, and consider the troubling stories as much as the pleasing ones.

We are each of us made up of the good and bad things in our natures and in what happens to us. I consider myself blessed, for my life has been mostly very

smooth and happy. God has shown me kindness in giving me a loving family, a good education, friends and useful work to do. Comparisons are meaningless, but I am certainly among the most fortunate and wealthiest people on this planet, when compared to so many around the world. Yet sadness has hit me too, in losing my father before his time, and in losing my wife, with whom I looked forward to at least some years of retirement. Most of us here could say the same.

Even in the midst of joy we may be in sorrow, and both readings today illustrate this paradox. In preparing this sermon, I read the first reading from Isaiah, with its encouraging and beautiful words:

It was no messenger or angel
but [the Lord's] presence that saved them;
in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. (Isaiah 63:9)

These words tell us of God's love and enduring promise to us. Yet here we are reminded again of the necessity to read not just the assigned passage, but the context, the rest of the chapter around this passage. The verses just before our passage are as follows (and this is God speaking through Isaiah):

For the day of vengeance was in my heart,
and the year for my redeeming work had come.
I looked, but there was no helper;
I stared, but there was no one to sustain me;
so my own arm brought me victory,
and my wrath sustained me.
I trampled down peoples in my anger,
I crushed them in my wrath,
and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth.' (Isaiah 63:4-6)

What is God doing? "Trampled down peoples in my anger?" "Crushed them in my wrath?" These phrases and others like them have led some people to conclude that the God of the Old Testament is a cruel and vengeful God. And God can be vengeful. In his love for his people, the people of Israel, he does act violently against their enemies. In fact, sometimes God acts violently against his own people, as when he caused the Babylonians to sack Jerusalem and carry away most of its people into exile. God works through humans, and causes them to do violent things when it will accomplish his ends. It is as well to understand that, though it is hard for us to accept.

But God always follows vengeance with mercy. He destroys and builds up again. The violent passage I just read, which is in God's voice, is followed by the passage of our first reading, in Isaiah's voice, when Isaiah says:

I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord,
the praiseworthy acts of the Lord,
because of all that the Lord has done for us,
and the great favour to the house of Israel
that he has shown them according to his mercy,
according to the abundance of his steadfast love. (Isaiah 63:7)

Isaiah gives thanks to God for saving him, and he goes on to say:

It was no messenger or angel
but his presence that saved them;
in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. (Isaiah 63:9)

Isaiah sees the destruction by God of his enemies, and give thanks for his redemption. Isaiah knows that God destroys his enemies, but gives help graciously to those who believe in him. God's might will protect his people.

(As I write this, the thunder and the heavy rain and hail outside is almost deafening. I consider God's might, like the words of the hymn:

I see the stars, I hear the roaring thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed!)

In our Gospel reading, we encounter a different scenario. The Wise Men have tricked King Herod by going home from the stable by a different route, and so not bringing him the info he had asked for: where the new child is being kept. In frustration, he orders that all children under two be slaughtered. We are advised by Matthew (who always notes these things) that this terrible act fulfilled another prophecy, from Jeremiah this time. Why should the wonderful, peace- and love-promoting act of the birth of Jesus be accompanied by such a cruel tragedy? It is not God doing this awful thing; it is Herod. And God has foiled Herod's plan to kill Jesus, by sending an angel to Joseph, who tells Joseph to take his family to Egypt. But he doesn't save all the other infants — they are killed by Herod's soldiers. As terrible as this is, the important thing is that Jesus has been saved; and Jesus is the one who will be the salvation of us all.

What does this teach us? We must not judge God's actions by human standards. When God struck down Israel's enemies in the times of the Old Testament, God was executing justice, and furthering his plan, which ultimately resulted in the birth of Jesus. We cannot call God cruel for these actions, for good and bad are ultimately judged according to standards set by God himself, and God's actions are always for the good. We cannot set ourselves up as judge over God. We can judge Herod's actions as cruel, for those are the actions of a human and, in this case, clearly motivated by jealousy and greed.

It is easy to see God's plan at work in the Gospel story. The baby Jesus must be protected from harm, and must grow to maturity, in order to do his Father's will. It is more difficult for us to understand the destruction of the other peoples who lived in the land God promised to Moses and the Israelites. But in both cases, God acts to his glory and will, and we must accept what God has done. To be a Christian means to accept Jesus as your Saviour, and to have complete faith in God as the loving and generous Father God is. God wants and expects our complete trust and faith, and fortunately, he made us be his people, so that trust and faith are inside us, written on our hearts. We only need to accept that we are truly God's people, and give thanks for what God is always doing for us.

There is much more which can be said on this topic; I have only provided a rough sketch of the issues we might consider. So search your hearts and find that faith which accepts God's will and celebrates his great and unending love. In Jesus' name. Amen.