

Ephesians 5:14

“Flee the Wrath to Come”

I'd like to start by saying if you have not seriously considered joining us for our Bearing Fruit Bible Study on Wednesday nights from 6-7 in the Youth Room of the Hut you really should. We have had some wonderful conversation, and I have to say I am truly blessed to see the ways God is working in the lives of those who have participated in this Bible study. On a Wednesday night during the Bearing Fruit Class we touched on a brief discussion of this phrase, “Flee the Wrath to Come.” The people in our Bearing Fruit Class don't like that phrase. Maybe you don't like it either. That's okay. That's okay. But perhaps, before you make up your minds it would be good to understand where the phrase comes from and what we as Methodists mean by it.

The phrase “Flee the Wrath to Come,” is hinted at many times in the Old and New Testaments. Many of us may have heard or at least heard of Hell Fire and Brimstone sermons urging people to give their lives to Christ in order that they may escape God's wrath. We have been given this idea that God is coming in wrath and vengeance and that God's wrath is something to be avoided at all cost. Now, I don't know about you, but I hate it when someone tries to make me do what they want with fear talk. When I was a teenager I was often handed this kind of turn or burn argument. (**pause**) Sadly, and too often in my imprudent youth, I often told people with a “turn or burn gospel” where they could stick it and walked the other way. It wasn't that I didn't think God was real, or that Jesus Christ came to die for my sins. I just don't like someone trying to force me to do or believe something... I'm gonna guess many of us are turned off from the kind of language that says if you don't turn away from your sins you will burn in the fires of hell, or that God is coming, and when God comes God is going to get you.

Charles Wesley is the younger brother of John Wesley. Charles Wesley experienced God's saving grace three days before his brother John Wesley felt his heart strangely warmed. The result of Charles' evangelical awakening was to deliver the sermon, “Awake, Thou That Sleepest,” April 4, 1742. It was the first and last time Charles Wesley would preach at St. Mary's Cathedral at Oxford. In reading Charles' sermon I get the feeling Charles is overjoyed at having received this saving faith, and yet like a lot of people because Charles was on the other side of salvation he could now clearly look back and see all that was wrong with the way he had been living. Charles depicts a chilling picture of those who are so comfortable and asleep in their sins they do not feel the fires ignited around them. Although they are being burned by the fires of hell they are so content these people do not notice their peril as the gates of hell open up beneath them like some great white shark about to swiftly strike from below with row after row of razor sharp teeth. Charles portrays a people who are so content going their own way they have no care for the danger around them.

Charles Wesley was a pastor; and it is a pastor's job to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Charles was trying to use fear to afflict those who are too comfortable in their sins that they should seek to rise from their fallen nature. Charles was trying to use fear to motivate people to rise up and take Christ's hand that we might receive salvation and an abundant life in Jesus Christ. It's old tactic. How many of us remember hearing our parents say things like you'd better eat all of your dinner or you won't get any desert. You'd better do what your Dad says or you'll get a spanking. You had better not act out in church or you'll have to pay the price when you get home. You had better not back talk your Momma or you'll get soap in your mouth.” Charles is using this same tactic in the hopes people will flee God's wrath in favor a closer relationship with God.

Now, here's something to consider. No one goes to hell by accident. As the Apostle Paul puts it,

“For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38,39).

Going along with Paul, C.S. Lewis puts it this way, “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’” Or as I like to put it, “Fine! Have it your own way!” “All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.”<sup>1</sup>

As a disciple of Jesus Christ who is challenged by the Great Commission, and just happens to be your pastor I am most interested in what helps people to both choose Jesus Christ and make the lifelong commitment to follow Him? Fear can

definitely be a great motivator. Anyone who has ever been chased by an angry dog knows fear can definitely make us run. However, I am not at all convinced fear is the **best** motivator. **(pause)** Let's try this. If you are a grandparent would you please stand as you are able? **(pause)** If you are a parent would you please stand up. **(pause)** Please remain standing. Now I'm going to ask the parents and grandparents a question. In which circumstance would you run faster? Would you run faster if a big angry dog was chasing you, or would run faster to save your child or grandchild from being hit by a truck? **(pause)** Show of hands. If you would run faster from an angry dog that was foaming at the mouth in an effort to save your own skin please raise your hands. Please put your hands down. If you would run faster to keep your child from being hit by a truck please raise your hands. Take a look kids. Your parents will always run faster to protect you than they would to save their own skins. Kids, do you know why? **(pause)** Your parents will always run faster to protect you than to protect themselves because that is the power of love. Love is more powerful than fear, and love will always be a better motivator than fear.

Sisters and brothers, hear me when I say this. Hell is real. Damnation is real. Being locked in a cage made from all of our guilt and all of our fears is real. The door is locked, barred, and chained shut by the way we sin and choose to go our own way instead of God's way. The fires of hate, and rage are fueled by jealousies and an unwillingness to forgive. These fires burn without end. And you don't have to die to be scorched by these fires. People carry these fires around today, and they are miserable. Some are like a dehydrated person who doesn't know they should drink. They are cut off from all that would give them life. Now we can choose to live that way. We can choose to run toward God out of fear for our lives. Or, we can choose to run toward God because an abundant life in Christ is infinitely better than a life of sin which burns with doubt, loneliness and grief. All of these things put distance between us and God. Being distant from God is the worst Hell a person can bring upon themselves. Paul is right when he says we cannot be separated from the love of God. However, we can choose to pull the covers over our heads and try to go back to sleep. We can choose to put the pillow over our heads to drown out the light, and the laughter, and the sounds of children playing. Brothers and sisters what choice will we make today? Will we choose to hide under the covers, and try to go back to sleep in our sins? Will we run to God terrified like a child who has just awoken from a nightmare in an effort to flee the wrath to come? Or will we accept the help Christ gives us to throw off the covers of sin and doubt so we might live in the light as Christ is in the light?

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis. The Great Divorce. Chap 9, pp72-73