

# Provoking God to Wrath

*Book of Isaiah*

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**Bible Text:** Isaiah 65:1-7

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If you will, look with me in your Bibles to Isaiah 65 and I want to speak with you from this portion of Scripture about "Provoking God to Wrath." I know this is not necessarily a popular subject but it is the word of God and it is a truth that we find most often in the Scriptures and you may have wondered at some point or other how it is that God can be provoked to wrath and so that's what I want us to consider together today.

Let me begin by reading from verse 1,

1 I am sought of them that asked not for me; I am found of them that sought me not: I said, Behold me, behold me, unto a nation that was not called by my name. 2 I have spread out my hands all the day unto a rebellious people, which walketh in a way that was not good, after their own thoughts; 3 A people [and here's the key phrase] that provoketh me to anger continually to my face; that sacrificeth in gardens, and burneth incense upon altars of brick; 4 Which remain among the graves, and lodge in the monuments, which eat swine's flesh, and broth of abominable things is in their vessels; 5 Which say, Stand by thyself, come not near to me; for I am holier than thou. These are a smoke in my nose, a fire that burneth all the day. 6 Behold, it is written before me: I will not keep silence, but will recompense, even recompense into their bosom, 7 Your iniquities, and the iniquities of your fathers together, saith the LORD, which have burned incense upon the mountains, and blasphemed me upon the hills: therefore will I measure their former work into their bosom.

Now, this may raise for us here a question that since God is sovereign and directs all things and determines beforehand the end from the beginning, how can it be said that he is provoked? And I believe this is one of the dangers for those of us whom the Lord has taught of his grace and his sovereignty and knowing that he is a merciful God, not to want to think about what it is to be under his wrath and yet we find here that the wrath of God is one of his attributes and one that must be answered. So you say, "How does this pertain to us?" Well, if his wrath has not been satisfied, then there remains nothing but an eternal wrath, an eternal judgment for those that he has left to themselves so the warning here is to such.

Now, the Scripture uses language that is simple and it is written in such a way that we can understand. How many of us as fathers have not been provoked to wrath or mothers or employers or just being in this flesh provoked to wrath and to anger? So it uses language here that helps us to understand what it is for God to be provoked to wrath, but at the same time, I would hurry on to say that wrath with God is not a passion. His wrath is a characteristic; it's an attribute; it's very closely linked to his justice. So I don't want anybody here thinking that God is out there just reacting to different people, you know, slamming this one, killing this one, going after this one, and as some people think, "Well, sooner or later he's going to get me." In their mind he's too busy right now, maybe he hasn't noticed but sooner or later he's going to get me.

We're not to think of God's anger and wrath as a passion that is pushed or energized, fueled in any way outside of himself, so when it says here in verse 3, "A people that provoketh me to anger continually to my face," it's saying that there is a wrath of God with which we all have to do. And we understand in this portion and even in the portion that Bob read for us in Deuteronomy 32 how that wrath is kindled. Here, even in our text, it's described as "a smoke," verse 5, "in my nose, a fire that burneth all the day." So it relates to his justice; it relates to his holiness; it relates to his righteousness. And again, if that righteousness has not been satisfied, then there remains nothing but that wrath for sinners so what is the only hope? That's the question that has to be answered.

But the translation here in verse 3, "that provoketh me to anger," all those words in the original are actually one word. That's one of the beauties of the Hebrew and the Greek language and the Lord has used it to set forth his character in his inspired word, but it's so picturesque. All those words that we see there, "that provoketh me to anger," are one word in the original and it means literally "to be vexed; to be indignant; to be wroth; or to be grieved." So, again, human language that is designed to help us understand God's holy character.

Now, before we get further in this text, I did want us to look up a few other portions of Scripture so if you have your Bible, I want us to read these. These are some characteristics of God's wrath found right here in his word to help us understand a little better this attribute or characteristic of God. In Psalm 103:8, here we see God's being slow to anger. So, again, it's not like us where someone makes us mad and we just blow off; we get upset and we react and we say things. When the Scriptures speak of God's wrath, it is controlled and determined by his very nature and his nature is to be slow to wrath but at the same time, I would warn all of us, "Don't become presumptuous because of that." Many a sinner has been hardened because they have challenged God and there has been no response and so they think, "Well then, it means that he's not there." No, he is slow to anger.

Here in Psalm 103, it says that, "The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy." So what that says is even though God doesn't respond or react to men's rebellion, because we have to realize rebellion is in the heart day and night even with ourselves, this nature, sin nature. When you stop and think about who we are and all

that we think before a holy God and that it is continually in, as it describes here, God's nostrils a fire that burns all day, we should not marvel when we hear of his judgments. We ought to marvel that he is so slow to anger and merciful and gracious. Alright?

Over in Romans 2, we see another characteristic of his wrath. This is both the Old and the New Testament, same God in Romans 2. In verse 1, he says, "Therefore thou art inexcusable." There are some people we have to deal with that think that God excuses ignorance, "Well, if I'm just ignorant, if I don't study these things, then God will be merciful." Read these words, "Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things. But we are sure that the judgment of God is according to truth against them which commit such things. And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?" He's talking there about preachers that love to stand up and crack the ten-pronged whip of the law on people and come down hard on them, bear down on them, and yet never stop to consider that that very law that they're swinging out and cracking that whip over the people, they have violated. There is not one of us that stands inexcusable.

"Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?" You see, that's what by the Spirit of God, he causes us to dwell upon if we're his, his goodness. "O, how merciful. O, how merciful. How merciful thou wast to me." How can it be? We sing these songs but I trust that they are from the heart because truly what makes us to differ? What distinguishes us from another? It's the goodness of God that leads thee to repentance. His goodness in Christ that causes these hearts to melt and to own our rebellion and be drawn to him.

But in contrast, all others it says, "But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation," here it is, "of the righteous judgment of God." Any that are judged, it can never be said of them that God judged them unfairly or condemned them unfairly. He is a righteous Judge.

So he's slow to anger, his nature to be merciful and yet when he does exercise that judgment and that condemnation and that wrath, it's not in a reactionary way but is according to his justice and his judgment. I liken it to a judge who restrains himself while he's sitting up in that bar listening to all this testimony, knowing full well that that person in front of him is a condemned criminal, but he goes through the whole process and then renders his judgment. That's a small picture of who God is, that he renders his judgment in all things in a just manner.

In Job 9:13, we have another characteristic of God's wrath here, Job being one of the oldest books written in Scripture, and I find this to be a comfort in that God does not change. We do not need to wonder whether he's different today than what he was. No, he's the same as he ever was. But here in Job 9:13, we see that none can resist. People are cocky in their attitude toward God. I've mentioned to you before about that one attorney with whom I spoke and he was used to handling some pretty tough cases and when I

spoke with him about standing before a holy God, he said, "I've been in front of the best and worst of judges," and he said, "I have no fear that when my time comes I'll know how to answer." That is a blindness and a cockiness which is expressive of just why God does judge sinners.

But if any think that they can resist, notice here in Job 9:11, "Lo, he goeth by me, and I see him not: he passeth on also, but I perceive him not. Behold, he taketh away, who can hinder him? who will say unto him, What doest thou? If God will not withdraw his anger," there's the word. So the picture is he's already determined it. There are vessels of wrath upon whom God has already determined that anger and nothing they do or say is going to change them from being a vessel of wrath to being a vessel of mercy.

"If God will not withdraw his anger, the proud helpers do stoop under him." That is anybody that may have been a help to that individual, somewhat of a comfort. You see, this is part of God's mercy. Even those that are condemned by his wrath, for whom Christ did not pay the debt, they live out their lives in some measure of comfort because they can always call a friend. They can always go to a concert. They can always go out and eat and kind of mingle with a crowd and feel a little bit better about themselves. But when God is pleased to exercise that wrath eternally and execute his judgment, there is none to help; none that can resist or reason with him.

Now, two other Scriptures I want you to see here about God's wrath. The other is in Numbers 32 and Bob read for us Deuteronomy 32, so there is a parallel here. But it speaks again in human language of God's wrath being aggravated by continual provocation. We read it in Romans 2 where that wrath is built up against the day of wrath. Again, human language. We can understand heating up a fire and making it hot and adding to that fire. Fire is fire, it burns; it's its character to burn. So when it says here in Numbers 32:14 that God's wrath is provoked, aggravated, let me read it for you, "Behold, ye are risen up in your fathers' stead, an increase of sinful men, to augment yet the fierce anger of the LORD toward Israel." The idea there is wrath upon wrath or actually the more man lives and thinks and reasons and breathes, the more it gives reason to God to condemn him. It's like Job said, "If I should open my mouth, even my mouth should contempt me." It's like maybe a condemned criminal trying to justify himself in a court of law and speaking out and interrupting the judge. None of those things are going to change that sentence. It is what it is and it is thereby aggravated by continual provocation.

Then one other Scripture, and there are many more, I'm just showing you this theme. But look with me in 2 Thessalonians 1 and here we see the restraint of God. There is none that can provoke God to anger or to wrath before the day of wrath, before he has determined it, and this is the comfort that we find Paul writing about to these Thessalonian believers as they were facing persecution and opposition and suffering. You see, here is where our minds slip. We begin to think, "Well, if they're the Lord's children, how come he's allowing," and I don't believe that that's even a term that is true to God's character, it's not that he just allows, he ordains, "how is it that he ordains persecution for his people?" And sometimes in the heat of it, whatever the affliction is, you might sit

back and wonder, "Where is God? Why doesn't he act?" Well, the reason is because he has determined even the execution of his wrath.

So Paul, writing to these Thessalonians who were facing persecution, he says in verse 3, let's begin there of chapter 1, "We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth; So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure: Which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer: Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you," So there is no question that God does recompense that tribulation. But read on, "And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed ) in that day." So there's a day that God has ordained in which he does exercise that wrath.

But coming back here to Isaiah 65 and I trust that's a helpful study, helpful background to what we're reading here. The first thing I'd like to have you consider with me is what is it then that causes God's wrath upon sinners? You might answer, "Well, it's just being a sinner," and that's true. We sin because we're sinners and any sin before a holy God is worthy of his wrath. But here in particular, we can see particularly in verse 2, for example, "I have spread out my hands all the day unto a rebellious people." Again, human language. I don't want you to think that this is a picture of a weak God. He's not wishing and hoping and wanting and so here he is begging with the hands spread out. The whole idea of his hands being spread out, that's a picture of his graciousness. Every help that he has given to these people in sustaining them in life and giving them breath and providing their nourishment and giving them some measure of comfort, they have disdained. Why? Well, the key word is in verse 2, a rebellious people. That's what we are by nature. Every one of us rebellious. We like to point it out in others and yet we have to be reminded that such as others are, so are we. That's who we are before a holy God.

But if you'll notice particularly in verse 3 down to verse 5, here are the specifics of God's wrath and what you are going to see here is that it has everything to do with false worship; it has to do with idolatry; it has to do with going after other gods rather than glorifying the one true God. Notice there in verse 3, "A people that provoketh me to anger continually to my face," and then the explanation, "that sacrificeth in gardens." These gardens were groves. They were places that were set up as rivalries to the one temple which God had ordained to be the place of worship because it was a picture of Christ. It goes all the way back to the garden. You've got the tree of life which the Lord told Adam and Eve they could eat of and live, and then you had all the other trees of the garden but you had the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And in their fall, they partook of that tree of the knowledge of good and evil and being of their seed, fallen

creatures, we still, give a man that latitude to worship as he thinks, he's always going to go another way. He's always going to be more interested in that tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Tell your kids, if you want to do an experiment sometime, just tell them they have the run of the house, "Enjoy yourselves. There's a playroom. Just do everything but I don't want you going into this room. And I'm going to tell you, you do not need to be looking in this room." Then pull back and, I mean, even doing it with adults, if you have people coming over to your house sometime and say, "Feel free. You've got the run of the house but please, please, please don't open that door." There is going to be somebody that's going to excuse themselves to go to the bathroom and if you listen long enough, you're going to hear that door creep open. Someone's going to peer in there and figure out what it is. That's just our nature. "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."

That's why it took Christ coming, his doing and dying, it's because that's our nature just like these here, and it is that that provokes God's wrath. In other words, his wrath is upon such. That open defiance of his word and his way as revealed here. The sacrificing in the gardens and as it says there, "burning incense upon altars of brick." Even this describes some superstition because if people wanted a particular protection for their homes, then they would make some sacrifices on the bricks of clay that they would use to build those homes and then they would take those bricks and put them up and it would provide some sort of protection. This was the thinking of the day.

Now, these were people just like you and I who had the Gospel preached unto them and who had been told over and over again the one way in which to approach unto God, and yet they determined in their rebellion to go another way. I've often said that. Just because somebody is sitting under the faithful preaching of the Gospel in no way indicates that they're the Lord's. All the while they sit and listen, there may be that heart kicking up. Maybe not outwardly, but that if God leaves us to ourselves, we will quickly go down another way in rebellion to the Lord and so this is what's described here.

In verse 4 it says, "Which remain among the graves." Well, there again, it describes consulting the dead or departed souls. This has been in the paper recently here in Shreveport with the Ghostbusters going around town and trying to hook up and link back in with some of the spirits of this city. You know, when I read this stuff, I think, "Am I in Africa?" because this is stuff, you know, when I was over there you would hear all the time. In the town that we were in, there was a little donkey that went around and ate out of people's fields and when that donkey came up to your yard or house, you're supposed to give it water to drink because there was some genie that lived down by the river, some lady that had died that had been crippled and she had no way to get around and so the town actually bought a donkey and dedicated it to this spirit and this genie, and when that donkey came to you, you'd better treat the donkey right because there was a genie riding on it even though you couldn't see it, and if you didn't, something bad was going to happen. This is the superstition of men but it's what the Lord is describing but, again, how hard and hardened is the heart of a hearer because this is talking to people who day

in and day out, the Scriptures say, had the Gospel preached unto them. Yes, in types and pictures and in prophecy and yet turn their own way.

"The eating of swine's flesh," that which was impure according to the laws of the time. "Broth of abominable things in their vessels." But look at here in verse 5, all that being so, considering themselves to be better than anybody else. Does anybody have a problem with that? It says there, "Which say, Stand by thyself, come not near to me; for I am holier than thou." That was the attitude that they had toward other nations. Here they were in their pompous rebellion looking down their nose at other people. Such things provoke the wrath of God.

I'll tell you, it's like a preacher said in days gone by, "Sin has slain its thousands, in self-righteousness its ten thousands." And I believe it's so. What it is that condemns this heart of ours is thinking ourselves in any way better than another. This was the doctrine of the Pharisees. The word "Pharisee" means "purist." Their idea was to set a standard for others to follow, they themselves being the standard, but we know already from reading in Isaiah 64, we are all as an unclean thing and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags and we all do fade as a leaf and our iniquities like the wind have taken us away. I'll tell you, the very thought of self-righteousness ought to cause us to bow when we think about it. Just the thought of it, bow and look to the Lord alone for mercy and grace.

But these are the things that are described as provoking God to wrath. It's false worship. I know there are a lot of congregations where you'll attend that they like to go through the Ten Commandments and try to break it down and give people a standard by which to live, but they miss the very beginning of the Ten Commandments. Do you know what the very first commandment is? "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." Everything else flows from there. Everything we do, if it's not the one true God, is worthy of condemnation. This is where the Lord dealt mightily in my own heart by his Spirit because I had been through all the education, preacher's school, and graduate school, and got all the degrees and was out there "planting churches" in a foreign land. You talk about the ultimate of sacrifice, that was what in that organization in which I had grown up, that was the ultimate thing to do: leave your homeland and your country and take your family and go overseas and endure hardship. Yet it was all dung until it pleased God to reveal Christ to me, and this was the very issue in which the Lord showed me that I was no different than any one of these rebellious sinners here. That holier than thou attitude in verse 5, that's what works religion does. It pits one against another. It makes one to think themselves better than another when in reality we're nothing but all the same dunghill and all made out of the same clay, worthy of condemnation lest it pleases God to save us. So we see that with regard to the wrath of God.

The second point then that we have to consider in this text is just simply what is the remedy. What is the remedy. My purpose today is just simply take this word as it is set forth here and point you to this God of justice, but what is the remedy? Well, here in verse 1, we see the remedy. He says, "I am sought of them that asked not for me; I am found of them that sought me not: I said, Behold me, behold me, unto a nation that was not called by my name." This was a prophecy here that we find in Scripture that foresaw

God setting aside the Jewish nation and calling in a people from other nations, from every tribe, nation and tongue, for whom Christ would come and pay their debt.

When he says, "I am sought of them that ask not for me and found of them that sought me not," it's talking about the Gentile nations out here and it shows that even this is how God exercises his wrath. A lot of times people think that God exercises his wrath when he finally casts somebody into hell, but I will tell you, it's as much a judgment for God to exercise his wrath in just passing by a people and we're going to sing that hymn here just in a little bit, "Pass me not O gentile Savior, hear my humble cry. While on others though art calling, do not pass me by." There are people living in this United States of America, very religious, zealous about what they do. They even will, some people call them Bible bangers, they'll hold tenaciously to this book being the word of God and yet they've never known the God of the book and they continue on in a path that is just as grievous as what's described here of these people.

And we could certainly take the time if needed to look at some of the parallels between sacrificing in the gardens and burning incense upon altars of brick. We see that all the time of bricks with people's names on them, pathways leading up to denominations and places of worship with people that have died and given money and prayers have been said over these bricks. There are a lot of parallels in the superstition. There's nothing new under the sun. It's just a different way in which people do it but it's all works religion. You know, pews dedicated in memory of people gone by. You talk about worshiping the dead. Hanging their pictures up on the walls. "Who's that?" Oh, that's a founder of this denomination or whatever.

I remember visiting in London one time with a Kenyan, somebody from Kenya, and it never dawned on me, we were actually going through Westminster Chapel and they buried everybody and their mother in Westminster Chapel that they think is worth anything. You walk there and you see the names on these tombs and they're actually buried in that chapel. As we were going along, the Kenyan looked at me and he said, "I find this very interesting." I said, "What's that?" He said, "We have missionaries coming over to Kenya to tell us about the evils of worshiping our ancestors and here I am in London, England on a tour going through a chapel and what are we doing? We're looking at the tombstones of people that have been buried here." He said, "What's the difference?" I said, "There isn't any." There isn't any.

So there are many things here that we could point out as parallels but here's the point I want to conclude with and for you to think about: the Lord has his people that he has purposed to save and he will cause them to seek him in truth. That's what it means here when it says, "I am sought of them that ask not for me. I am found of them that sought me not." And I'm here to tell you that's a Ken Wimer because I was lost in my self-righteousness and never even thought of ever needing a Savior. I thought I had him. I did have a savior but it wasn't the Savior. I was reading this book, I studied it in the original languages and was still lost and I was contributing to a false religion that was ever much as condemnable as what we're reading here about burning incense in gardens and teaching men to do so.



You say, "What made the difference?" Well, it pleased God to reveal Christ in me and I can say that I was found of the Lord without him even requiring anything of me. It pleased the Lord to draw me, such is his grace and mercy, and I'm thankful it's that way. That's how he works. That's how he gets all the glory. And when he says by his Spirit there in verse 1, "Behold me, behold me," it's not looking to a doctrine. It's not looking to a denomination. It's not looking to a ceremony. It's not looking to a creed. It's looking to the God of very gods. The Lord of lords. The Redeemer. The Savior. And it says, "unto a nation that was not called by my name." God is in the business of taking lost sinners and drawing them to himself and teaching them to worship him in Spirit and truth and all of that because of the one work of the Lord Jesus Christ. If the Lord has ever taught us of him, we'll never want to go any other place. We'll never want to sacrifice in any other way. We'll look to the one sacrifice that's been accomplished for sinners.