

An Unquenchable Fire

Book of Isaiah

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Bible Text: Isaiah 66:15-18

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If you will, take your Bibles and look with me in Isaiah 66. We're going to read from verse 15 down to verse 24 and I want to speak with you on God's unquenchable fire. An unquenchable fire. We'll read all the way down to verse 24 but not likely to get there but it's certainly all as one portion that we need to consider together. Verse 15 of Isaiah 66, "For, behold, the LORD will come with fire," and you can see this is on the heels of verse 14 where he talks about grace toward his people, those he has chosen in Christ and that Christ has redeemed, but indignation toward his enemies. So where you see the word "for" here, you've got to always ask, "Why is it there?" "For, behold," lest anybody think that God is just a God of love as you hear being preached and never hurt a flea, well, listen up.

15 For, behold, the LORD will come with fire, and with his chariots like a whirlwind, to render his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire.

The book of Hebrews says God is a consuming fire so that's who we're going to consider today and all that that means.

16 For by fire and by his sword will the LORD plead with all flesh: and the slain of the LORD shall be many. 17 They that sanctify themselves, and purify themselves in the gardens behind one tree in the midst, eating swine's flesh, and the abomination, and the mouse, shall be consumed together, saith the LORD. 18 For I know their works and their thoughts: it shall come, that I will gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come, and see my glory. 19 And I will set a sign among them, and I will send those that escape of them unto the nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, that draw the bow, to Tubal, and Javan, to the isles afar off, that have not heard my fame, neither have seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the Gentiles.

That's probably as far as we're going to get but I want to read the rest here so you see the context.

20 And they shall bring all your brethren for an offering unto the LORD out of all nations upon horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and upon mules, and upon swift beasts, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, saith the LORD, as the children of Israel bring an offering in a clean vessel into the house of the LORD. 21 And I will also take of them for priests and for Levites, saith the LORD. 22 For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, saith the LORD, so shall your seed and your name remain. 23 And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the LORD. 24 And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.

So here in verse 15, we have a figure of speech used of fire and it's used to describe God's justice and his wrath poured out upon his enemies. Now, God is not literally a fire but it says that he's a consuming fire. We've not to think of God in terms of an object like the sun, but it's a representation. When you stop and think about the energy bursts of the sun and what it is that is feeding that sun and it's all self-contained. There's a lot about the sun that we could learn about God but the sun is not God and God is not the sun. That's why the Lord warned the Israelites not to go out and look up at the sun or the moon and begin to worship it. You see, that's what natural man does. He worships the creature rather than the Creator.

But we have here a figure of speech when it says that the Lord will come with fire. Notice the comparison of fire in verse 15, "to render his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire." So these depict his anger; they depict his rebuke. Wrath with God is not a passion. He's not up in heaven somewhere reacting to what men do like we do. You know, someone pushes your buttons enough and then you go off. That's not God's wrath. His wrath is restrained. His wrath is purposed, it's directed. That's how he can be longsuffering with the vessels of wrath until the day of wrath because it's not a passion.

It's a justice and so when the Lord says, "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," we don't even have an idea what that is because in our thinking we're thinking, "Good, I hope he does it tomorrow." That's how we think. "Man, if he'd just revenge right now." Well, that's not what God does. It's a just wrath and let's be careful, because all the while you might be reacting to that sinner there thinking, "I wish God would just destroy him," what if he's one for whom Christ died? Then there is no wrath and in time the Lord will bring him. You see, we're not good judges of these things. All we think is ourselves and I don't mean it in a profane way, but when people say, "Be damned or God damn," that is a very strong word.

People don't think about what they're saying. Most people think, "If I was God, this is what I would do." Well, thankfully you're not God. I think about how he was merciful to me and should have cast me into hell but didn't and kept me until such time as he was pleased to reveal Christ in me and I found out that I was an object of mercy and not of

wrath. You see, there are a number of objects of wrath today that think they're objects of mercy and the great surprise will be when they face a God that they have never known. They're thinking he's a God of love like an old grandfather sitting in a rocking chair and kids misbehaving and, "Okay, well, just a stage they're going through, but I love you anyway." That's the message of popular religion: God loves you anyway. And I fear that many that are being taken out of this life are facing this God that is described here: a God of fury, a God of wrath, a God of anger.

Scripture says that he's angry with the wicked every day and, again, we have to understand his anger and in a sense his justice is toward the wicked every day. It's not that he's up there steaming like when we get angry. We're steaming. He continues to be merciful. That's what adds to this wrath because he's a merciful God. He causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. He's not withholding his hand and all of that adds to their condemnation when they don't turn to him. He leaves them to their own reprobate minds.

So when it says here, "For, behold, the LORD will come with fire," that word "with" actually in the original could also be translated "as" fire, so there's your similitude. He will come, he is coming, but he'll come as fire and fire in Scripture is a common emblem to denote the coming Lord to judge and to punish his enemies. If you'll hold your finger here and look in Psalm 50:3, we read here, "Our God shall come, and shall not keep silence: a fire shall devour before him, and it shall be very tempestuous round about him." So that's the picture that we have of God's judgment, God's justice.

So let's look, first of all, at the nature of God's unquenchable fire. We're going to look at the nature of it. We're going to look at the authority. Some people say, "By what right does God have to exercise his wrath?" That right there shows rebellion. Can you imagine a criminal being brought into a court and standing up to the judge and saying, "By what right do you have to be up there judging me right now?" That's how sinful flesh reasons so we're going to look at the authority of God. The extent of his justice and wrath. We're going to see, thirdly, those that are the specific objects of his unquenchable wrath. Obviously it's not everybody else we'd all be cast into hell. Then, fourthly, and this is probably about as far as we'll get in verses 18 and 19, how God's glory is revealed in this unquenchable fire.

So a lot to see here but, first of all, the nature. It says, "Our God shall come," in verse 15, "and shall not keep silence: a fire shall devour before him, and it shall be very tempestuous round about him." That's what we saw in Psalm 50:3. I don't know about you, but as I was reading verse 15, "the LORD will come," you think about when this was written, this was written before the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ on this earth. Was it fulfilled in his coming? Well, look with me in Matthew 3. How else has God come into this world except through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ? So we can see here, in one sense, this has been fulfilled.

Look in Matthew 3. When John spoke of the Christ that he was sent out to proclaim, notice in verse 12, "Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and

gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." So back here in Isaiah 66:15, "For, behold, the LORD will come with fire," I don't believe that we should see this simply as in the end of time there is going to be this fire, but you could put in the margin there of your Bible: he has come. Christ came and in his coming there was a dividing. There was a purging of his floor. In one sense, there has already been a gathering in of the wheat into the garner. This fire which came before him as described here, if it has not fallen on the wheat, it's because that wheat was gathered in first. You say, "How was it gathered in?" In the person of Christ. You see, the same fire of God's wrath must fall on every single sinner in this world because he's angry with the wicked every day, but if it has not fallen on me, it's not because he's withheld it, it's because it fell on a substitute.

So God has come and he has come with fire and "his chariots like a whirlwind, to render his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire." But if we have not been the objects of wrath, if we have not been the objects of his justice, it's not that he's withheld it from us, it's because he put it on his Son. You think about the pictures in the Old Testament about the sacrificial lambs that were offered up with fire. You see, it was because of Israel's hardness they couldn't see Christ in that, but that was a picture of God's all-consuming wrath consuming the sacrifice and not the people. Just like in the days of Noah, Noah and his family were not spared from the flood. They went through the flood just like the rest of the world. They were condemned with the world, so to speak, but not condemned with the world. You say, "Why not?" Well, the ark bore that judgment. Do you see how it's a picture of Christ? The ark bore it. So it's not like God is two-faced. "Well, all these over here that he has purposed to save, then he's showing favoritism." No, the wrath that was due them fell just like it falls on these over here. The only difference is there's a substitute; there's a Savior; there's a satisfaction that took place.

So I believe the whole Gospel here can be preached from verse 15, "For, behold." Every time you see "behold," it's like John the Baptist, "Behold the Lamb!" That's what I want us to see. "Behold the Lamb." If you have any question as to the work that the Lord Jesus Christ accomplished for sinners, think about the wrath of God that should have justly fallen on any one of us, but he bore it. That consuming fire consumed him to such a satisfaction of God's righteousness that God then, there remained nothing but mercy to show. There remained nothing but righteousness to impute to the account of his people, but to the rest, that wrath is still upon them. There is that wrath which is keeping up against the day of wrath.

So I believe here in Matthew 3:12, we can see that God isn't showing favoritism. The nature of this unquenchable fire illustrates the justice of God which is the just dessert of every single one of his creatures and yet if we are not the objects of that wrath, it's only because of his grace, and it's only because of the work that the Lord Jesus Christ accomplished. You say, "What of those for whom he did not pay the debt?" You see, that's the only difference between a Peter and a Judas. That's the only difference between us or anybody else out there in the world if we're the Lord's. It's the substitute. It's the satisfaction of the Savior.

What remains for those for whom Christ did not die? Look at 2 Thessalonians 1. You're going to see here this is a language of Scripture, not just of the Old Testament. I hear people say all the time, "That's the God of the Old Testament. That's the way he used to be." As if he changed. "Now he's a God of love." No. Look here 2 Thessalonians 1, notice in verse 6, this is what Bob read for us a little while ago, "Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you." You see, if we're the Lord's, we're going to have trouble in this world, tribulation. We should feel ill at ease. Have you ever stopped and think why you feel so ill at ease in this life? Well, that's a good thing. The world doesn't, the world keeps trying to find that utopia here but when the Lord troubles us it's for a purpose and when oppose us over the Gospel, over Christ, that's a good thing.

Here it says, "it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you; And to you who are troubled rest with us," notice, "when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire." Again, don't be looking up and thinking, here comes an asteroid, Christ riding on it. No it's, again, a similitude, with justice, "taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ," and it says, "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 been this dividing already. The wheat has been gathered in, the chaff is yet to be burned, but it's the Lord that does this.

So that's the nature of God's unquenchable fire. He's a just God. He has to exercise that justice. He cannot lower his standard with regard to men's sin and I want you to see that. If you're the Lord's, he hasn't lowered his standard to save you or me. That justice has been satisfied in your substitute, in my substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ. But other than that, there remains, just like in the day the heavens reserved that water that was to fall on the earth in the first destruction of this world, but the Scriptures say that the destruction to come is not a water but a fire. It's the ultimate destruction. There is nothing that destroys like fire. We're seeing some of the flooding, but after the waters go through, you can still see elements of houses and damage and people go in and try and clean it up. I'll tell you, when a fire goes through, it razes everything. It gets hot enough and tense enough, it completely destroys the terrain and everything in its path. Burns it up. That's how God's justice is described.

And I'll tell you what, if men think that somehow they're going to stand before a holy God some day in their piddly little righteousness or supposed good works that they think will somehow please God, how deceived they are. You know, if righteousness, Paul said to the Galatians, come by law or a man's keeping of the law, it says, Christ has died in vain. You make the death of Christ of none effect. It's as much as spitting in the face of Christ and saying, "You didn't need to die because I could have done this myself." People that reason that way don't know God, don't know his justice.

So that's the nature of this unquenchable fire, but come back here to Isaiah 66 and look at the second point in verse 16. With what authority does God exercise this justice in this unquenchable fire? It says, "For by fire and by his sword will the LORD plead with all flesh." Now, you have to understand some legal terms. I had to do this, I had to go back and study it. This is not a picture of God pleading like you hear preachers doing, "Won't you please come to Christ? Won't you please hear God?" That's not the sense here.

This word "pleading" is a legal term and if you've ever had a court case, there is a complaint against the defendant. That's called a plea in the court of law, that there is a complain, a legal document that charges a certain person. That's a plea. When they talk about plea bargaining in our court system, the idea is that we're going to work something out outside of court and a lot of people think that that's the way it's going to be with God, but it's not. If you think a Supreme Court ruling has a final say in our day, it's nothing compared to the court of heaven.

So read in verse 16 here, "For by fire and by his sword will the LORD bring his complaint, his legal complaint, against all flesh." There won't be anybody that can stand before him and stay his hand and say unto him, "What doest thou?" In fact, in all of the Gospels, and this is where time fails us, but I would encourage you to take the Scriptures sometime this week and go back and read through the Gospels. Whenever the Lord speaks of this judgment, particularly in Matthew, read through all those parables and the order is given to bind that individual and to cast him into utter darkness, you'll never read that there's even an opportunity for a person to respond. Such is the authority of God. You see, this world doesn't know such a God. They don't know a God who is sovereign in how he exercises his justice, how he exercises his holiness, how he exercises his grace. But I will tell you, he's just in how he saves sinners and he is just in how he condemns sinners. There is no difference.

So whereby his sword, the sword is an instrument by which punishment is executed. So just like fire in Scripture represents God's justice, the sword represents the same. Those are equivalent. "For by fire and by his sword," even by his sword. If you look, for example, at Isaiah 34, look with me in Isaiah 34, look how it is put here, "For my sword shall be bathed in heaven: behold, it shall come down upon Idumea, and upon the people of my curse, to judgment. The sword of the LORD is filled with blood." So whether it's fire or sword, both of these describe the same thing.

You know, I mentioned to you that the only reason any of us that are the Lord's people by his grace have not felt the fire of his indignation and wrath, it's because that fire fell on our Lord Jesus Christ. But you stop and think about the sword as well. The sword of God's justice. Why is it that it has not fallen on us if we're the Lord's? Well, because it pierced the heart of our Savior. That sword there in Zechariah, "Await thou, O sword," is the way it's put I believe in Zechariah 13, "and smite," what? "The shepherd." The sheep would scatter but that sword did not fall on the sheep because it fell on the shepherd.

So when we read this here in Isaiah 66:16, it's not like it was when I was growing up in boarding school. We had a prod system. They call it prods but it was really demerit, and

depending on your grade, fourth, fifth, sixth, you were expected to behave better and better as you got up in grades. I don't know how that worked. When you were in fourth grade you got like seven prods. You were allowed seven mishaps in a week or whatever, however you could explain it, but they didn't spank you right away, they just went up and put a tick and everybody could see it. So as kids we're all standing there before supertime seeing how many each one had left and if you were in fourth grade, you got seven. If you were fourth through fifth and sixth, you got seven, but then when you got on up there, you got down to three because the eighth graders, it was just up through eighth grade, the eighth graders only got three. So you know how eighth graders are, we were all trying to just get those first two, get away with it, because we knew we weren't going to get a licking unless you did something really bad, but just put a prod up there. But after you got two, it was like best behavior because every week the clock reset, but the day of rendering was on a Saturday. You'd get up and do your chores on Saturday morning, eat breakfast, and we all knew which kids were getting a licking. This was a big red paddle, this was the good old days, and they would have to go into the dorm parent's room and, of course, the walls were real thin, and we always thought that maybe they weren't spanking the girls as hard as the guys because the girls, we'd listen for the whack. But we're all sitting on the sideline thinking, "Ha, ha," you know, as if we were less guilty. It's just that we got away with things that they didn't. The law caught up with them and they had a day of rendering on Saturday.

Believe it or not, that's the system I grew up in. I didn't raise my kids that way, but the idea that I mention that is simply that we can't stand here and read this and think, "Good, flesh is getting what it deserves." We have to stop and think, "Wait a minute, I'm just as guilty as that one upon whom that wrath is about to fall and if it hasn't fallen, it's only because there's one who bore it on my behalf." And I think about that, the sword that fell upon my Lord and not upon me.

So that's the authority, and notice it says, "all flesh." So we talk here about the authority of this justice, but also the extent of it, all flesh. I think there are people that if they know anything about what is being preached in this congregation and they drive by, they go by, I think the thought is, "Well, that's their God." Have you ever had people reason that way? "Ah, that's your God." Now wait a minute, how many Gods are there? They might be rejecting this message and our God, but the fact is they're going to have to deal with him one day. They will stand before him one day. He is the God of all flesh.

And here it says, "the slain of the LORD shall be many." If you listen to popular preachers today, the idea is that it's just the opposite. There will be few that God will have to judge and they can think of the worst criminals, the Hitlers, the Saddam Husseins, all the serial killers, those, but for the most part if we just keep doing our job and getting out there and getting people converted, there will be many that God will be pleased to save through our efforts. That's the way works religion thinks.

But what does it say in your Bible? "And the slain of the LORD shall be many." Our Lord said, "Broad is the way that leads to destruction." That's a sad reality and I don't say it in any way lightly, but the reality is even when Christ walked on this earth and went

about from village to village preaching and teaching and they saw how the Lord would cross land and sea just for one sinner and then he'd get in that boat and go his way, or walk through the town just for one, "Zacchaeus, come down for today salvation has come to thy house." Here's a true son of Abraham. This was one that he would pay the debt for and what did he do with the rest? Left them to themselves.

You think about the masses who have never heard and don't know. There's a reason. You know, it's not a mistake with God. You have to wonder at his grace that he'd be pleased to reveal Christ in you or in me, but I will tell you, as it says here, "the slain of the LORD shall be many." And if there is any reason why we're not among that number, I'll tell you the only reason is because of the grace of God in the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you look, for example, in Revelation 19, and I'm not trying to stir up any emotion here. I'm just trying to declare to you what this word says, and every word is inspired of God and important. "And the slain of the LORD shall be many." That means then that most of what's going on in this world, 99.99% of it that is done in the name of God has nothing to do with God's glory. The many. Many shall be slain.

Here in Revelation 19, "And after these things I heard a great voice of much people in heaven, saying, Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God." Notice, "For true and righteous are his judgments: for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand. And again they said, Alleluia. And," what? "Her smoke rose up for ever and ever." Yes, there are, I like the way it's put here. Many, there are the many who are called that Christ has redeemed, but let's not forget also "the slain of the LORD shall be many." If Christ died for us, we were slain of the Lord in him. When he died, we died. When he rose again, we rose again. That was our judgment. It has been rendered. It's been done, finished, but for all others, this is what remains.

Alright, come back here to Isaiah 66:17. Who then are these objects of God's unquenchable wrath? I find it interesting and our mind kind of goes there, you pick the most evil, wretched person you can think of, a murderer, a serial killer, somebody out there and we think, "Ah! That's an object of God's wrath." Look here in verse 17 and verse 18 that the Lord describes as the objects of his wrath. It's actually people who worship him, in other words, who come to him in some manner of worship but it's a false worship. I don't know whether your eyes have been opened to see this yet or not but there is nothing more abominable to God than false worship. I fear more and I don't know how to say this because I don't want to condone anything, but I fear more a new place of worship going up in the name of God than I would a brothel or a bar being set up in town because the thing that God condemns is the thing that most people don't see as a condemnation.

I can remember in the little town where I was there on the Ivory Coast one time, a big windstorm came through and there was a mission organization there that had just put up this huge building just like they do here. They invest all kinds of money even in a poor country into putting up a church building. Have you ever noticed that? Even driving in

some rural areas here in the United States, you'll go back and you look at some of the shacks that people live in, just little houses barely standing and then all of a sudden in the center of town there is this huge, monstrous church building that you know cost millions of dollars and people are made to believe that by giving to that, that somehow they're serving God. So they flock, they're made to believe these sorts of things.

Well, dear friends, look at here, who are the objects of wrath. Verse 17, "They that sanctify themselves, and purify themselves in the gardens behind one tree in the midst, eating swine's flesh, and the abomination, and the mouse, shall be consumed together, saith the LORD." Now you have to understand a little bit of culture but eating swine's flesh, that was something that the Lord had prohibited in the law. You say, "The mouse?" Believe it or not, in some of the surrounding cultures of those nations, it was actually a delicacy, a part of worship to eat a mouse. So when you see both of these in this one verse, what it's saying is, "Here is a mixed worship, taking a little bit of what God prohibited here with idolatry over here, bringing it all together."

The key there, verse 17, it's not the Lord having sanctified them. You see, the only way that a sinner can truly be sanctified is in the Lord Jesus Christ, but it says, "that sanctify themselves, and purify themselves in the gardens." Gardens, these were groves. There's another thing about places where people pick to put church buildings. Have you ever noticed how they just, if they're putting money into it, it's going to be very attractive. Laid out there. Put up on a hill somewhere where everybody will appreciate that this is a center of worship. They might even put up a 200 foot cross so everybody can see it. All these things. There's nothing new under the sun. This is idolatry. It's been that way and continues to be that way, but it's such, it says here, that the Lord consumes.

False worship. When the Lord said and he calls it there "abomination," the abomination. Men don't see their false worship as an abomination but God does and I'll tell you, better the simplicity of what the Lord has given us here where we come and in a simple manner we sing unto the Lord and we hear of this glorious Savior, Redeemer, salvation, grace, and go away rejoicing in that one without any confidence in this flesh. I'm thankful, dear friends, that's it not a matter of me sanctifying myself or purifying myself through any works of my hands. But Christ said, "For their sakes I sanctify myself." That's what he said in John 17. "Ken, when were you sanctified?" When Christ died. "When were you purified?" When Christ died. That's the only altar that God ever looks upon. Any other is a false altar.

And he says in verse 18, "For I know their works and their thoughts." You know, most people today think that God, when they stand before God it's just going to be a matter of being judged for their works, but look what the Scriptures say, "I know their works and their thoughts." Try putting that up. Your works won't even stand before a holy God, but imagine your thoughts. I've often said that. You get somebody that's a little cocky and they feel like they're somebody, I tell them that. I say, "If you don't mind, if you could be honest, why don't you just write down on a piece of paper every thought you've had since the beginning. You've got to be honest and let's see what it looks like at the end of the day." I venture to say that if they showed it to you and they were honest and really wrote

down every thought, you'd think that person was the worst criminal in the world. Child predator. Sex predator. Murderer.

All these thoughts come through this mind and heart and if God were to judge us based upon even our works, but even moreso our thoughts, who could stand? But then again, I have to tell you, he has judged us based upon our works and our thoughts if Christ paid our debt because Christ had to not only fulfill the outward precepts of the law, but even the letter of the law, the spirit of the law. He's the only one who ever has and he has given unto his Father that perfect satisfaction.

So, again, God hasn't lowered his standard to save any one of us, but anybody outside of Christ, this is what they have to look forward to. "I know their works and their thoughts: it shall come, that I will gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come, and see my glory." Now, I've got to draw a line here. Next time we come back, we're going to link all of this up, but ask yourself that question. Again, we saw it in verse 15, "For, behold, the LORD will come with fire." He has in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ and he shall at the end of time for all others, but would this not also be linked to that when he would gather all nations and tongues and they shall come? It says God shall come, but then he'll gather them and they shall come and what? See my glory. There is a glory to be seen in all of this and, Lord willing, we'll look at it next time.