Isaiah 35:4 Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, He will come with vengeance; with divine retribution He will come to save you.

In the liberal theological world of today I am pretty sure that God is not understood or grasped. I say that because there are so many people and theologies that would have all kinds of problems and troubles with what this passage says. That’s because people seem to think that God is just make believe and for that reason they think you can just make God into anything you want Him to be. And in many cases, what they make God out to be is anything but what God is.

The problem comes because of mankind’s failure to understand the very nature of God himself. We want to focus on just one of God’s attributes rather than the whole of God’s attributes. In our Catechism, based on God’s Word, the attributes of God are listed as such: eternal, almighty, all-knowing, present everywhere, holy, just, faithful, good, compassionate, gracious, loving and forgiving. As we think of all of these we need to grasp how they work together and give us the complete picture of God. Now, it’s not that man can’t understand God but rather that man chooses to ignore and overlook the reality of God. For that reason mankind just can’t get a handle on God. What is interesting is that the passage before us forces us to wrestle with the truth and reality of God. Let’s just quickly look at it.

The passage says, **“Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, He will come with vengeance; with divine retribution He will come to save you.”** Break it down for yourself. First it says, **Be strong, do not fear; your God will come…”** Now if we stop there everything is fine. The passage tells us to have hope and confidence in God. That’s really the point of telling you to “be strong.” Our strength is from the Lord, because we trust and know that He will do what is just, right, good and compassionate. Then the passage tells us **“Do not fear.”** Simple encouragement, hard to carry out. We are not to be afraid. Really, this is a general admonition to set aside all that frightens and causes us to tremble. And since we have the general idea that the only real thing to fear is God, God who says He is on our side, well, then this encouragement is quite logical to the believer. Then our passage says, **“Your God will come.”** It is a promise that God is going to come and be a part of our lives. When you consider prophecies of the Messiah, then you grasp it is a promise of His coming and being a part of our world or I suppose you could also understand the promise in the sense of what is going to happen at the end of the world when God comes and this whole world ceases to exist and the only thing that will be will be the eternal and perfect kingdom of God where we will live forever.

So far, so good. That is, if we stop here then everything is fine, but in truth that is not where the passage stops. The passage goes no: **“He will come with vengeance,”** that means that God is coming to get revenge on those who have done him wrong, namely, those who are sinners, anyone who has done wrong by the standards and rules of God! And if that isn’t bad enough the passage stresses the same thing twice by stating: **“With divine retribution He will come.”** Not just simple vengeance but rather divine action where the perfect, all knowing, and all powerful God will bring upon the wrong doer exactly what He decides they fully deserve! Again, mentioned twice to stress “Oh yeah, this is exactly what is going to happen!”

Now tell me, just how do you suppose that we are going to not fear and be strong when the very being who made the heavens and earth and all that is in them is coming back with vengeance and divine retribution against those who reject, against every single sinner who has ever done wrong or sinned?

You would be surprised at how many people can’t understand this passage and the number of people who think this passage contradicts itself. You would be amazed at how many people reject this passage and the hundreds like it, who consider the Bible and even God himself to be a whole bunch of hooey! And the whole reason they act this way is because they cannot grasp how God can be vengeful and yet save.

Do you understand it? Hopefully you will by the time you leave here today. Let’s look at this passage under the theme: **UNDERSTANDING THE TRUTH OF GOD!**

Basically we have already looked at what the passage itself has to say. What we need to do is put the two so-called “at odd” views together. The best way to do that is to ask the very simple question: “How is this possible for God to come with vengeance and yet come to save?”

Let’s answer the first part of that question: “How is it possible for God to come with vengeance?” Again the answer is really very simple. You remember from your catechism days the fact that there are two main doctrines in the Bible. There is the Law and there is the Gospel. God’s coming with vengeance is the result of the Law and its demands.

The Law says, which means that God says, “This is what you can do and this is what you cannot do.” Remember, these are the commands of God. You as a creature of God are to obey these commands and you are to do it perfectly. Not close! Not almost! Not 99.99998% but perfectly, without flaw or blemish of any kind! God also makes it clear in His Law that if you do not perfectly keep His commands then you are guilty of sin, for disobedience to God’s law is sin. Now God says that He hates sin (Ps 5:5, Ps 45:6-7). God says that He will punish sin (Jer. 31:3, Ro. 6:23). Those who sin, deserve and will get eternal damnation. This is how the Law, God’s Law, says that God will act and be.

That God is such and still is such today is true. Many people try and say that since Jesus came the Law is cancelled and therefore God isn’t the vengeful God that the Law speaks of. Yet consider the following passages. Eph 5:5-6 says, **“For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person-- such a man is an idolater-- has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. 7 Therefore do not be partners with them.”** Those words seem pretty clear!

How about what Romans 2:8 says, **“But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.”** Again those are pretty clear and forceful words. Finally the passage that really lays it down well, Hebrews 10:26-29: **“If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, 27 but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. 28 Anyone who rejected the Law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29 How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?** Those words don’t seem to imply that the vengeance of God is void, rather it appears the threat of the Law and of God’s vengeance is still a factor we need to understand and consider.

The reason I use these passages is because all of them are from the New Testament after Jesus has come. The point being that God’s vengeance is still a reality and the Law of God is still in force. God will come and he will come with vengeance and divine retribution! Incidentally, that section of Hebrews closes by saying: **“It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God.”** So it is! So it is!

Of course, I hope you paid particular attention to the Hebrew passage that I read for that passage had a wonderful clue as to how our dilemma can be solved. Which brings us to consider the second part of our question, “If God is coming with vengeance then how can He possibly save?”

Here, my dear people, we are dealing with the Gospel of God. The Gospel says that the believer in the Son of God will receive the gift of eternal life and salvation. This eternal life and salvation is given solely by God, simply because you have heard and believed the message of Jesus Christ. It is a message that says, “You are saved!” But what about your sins (and they are plentiful aren’t they)? For it is our sins that God threatens to punish. Here is the very heart of the matter.

You cannot understand the vengeful God and the saving God, who is the same God, unless you understand the cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus the Christ died on the cross. He died on that cross to suffer the wrath, the punishment, the vengeance, the divine retribution of God for the sins of every man. God’s law says that God will punish sin. Well, He did! Only instead of you and me, God punished his Son Jesus for us. That’s why Jesus came. He came to willingly give His life for our sake. He came to do what we could not. First to perfectly obey the Law and be perfectly holy and righteous. Then Jesus, out of love for us, went to the cross to suffer and die in our place the pangs and horrors of sin.

Here is the key. When we have faith in Jesus, we receive the benefit of what Jesus did. His perfect life is considered ours. His holiness and righteousness is considered ours. That is what the forgiveness of sins is all about. Because of what God has done in Jesus, we become heirs of eternal life and salvation, we become, in the eyes of God, holy and righteous, even though we really are not. Such is the awesome power and wonder of Jesus.

And please, don’t undermine this wonderful truth and grace of God. Don’t decide that sin does not matter and you can do what you want. Don’t have the attitude that it is a free for all in this world and that now God just has to accept and love you. It will all depend on faith. Again faith **“is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”** I hope for salvation. I have never seen Jesus or heaven or even anything that gives me an inkling about the reality of God. But God has sent His Holy Spirit into my life through the gospel in Word and sacrament. God supplies me and all souls with everything necessary for this gift. Our only job is to believe!

But I do believe that faith has an impact on our lives. I do believe that the Holy Spirit, when truly a part of our lives, leads us to hate sin and desire lives pleasing to God. I do believe the Holy Spirit causes us to repent, to be filled with sorrow and at the same time the wonderful knowledge that He will forgive for the sake of Jesus. All because I believe. I trust what God has said. I trust Jesus. I trust God’s Word. I let everything for me rest in the wonder and awesomeness of this God whose sense of perfect justice is shown when He speaks bluntly along the lines of the Law and when He speaks lovingly and graciously of the power of the Gospel in Jesus.

So what have you learned? We have learned that God will come with vengeance. It happened when Jesus came. God truly brought his divine retribution upon His Son. In this act God has offered all of us a free pass into heaven. Yet understand that God has tied it all together in Jesus. Reject Jesus, reject God’s Word, reject the wonder and truth of God and you end up with nothing but the Law in your life. So, when God comes again or when you are called out of this world, it is not going to be peaceful moment for you. But believe, trust in the wonder and work of Jesus and you will find that God’s promise of salvation is truly yours. May you be found a believer in Jesus and his awesome salvation! Amen.