

The Wrath of God

Romans 1:18-32

Why does every person to have ever been born on planet earth desperately need the power of God in the gospel of God?

Because of the wrath of God.

Without a robust understanding of the wrath of God, the gospel will be of little value to men.

Read Romans 1:18-32.

What is the wrath of God? The wrath of God inwardly involves his extreme anger against evil.

The wrath of God outwardly involves his administering deserved punishment upon those who are evil.

When I use the word evil, I am referring to two basic kinds of evil:

- Ungodliness
- Unrighteousness

For

the wrath of God is revealed
from heaven
against all
ungodliness
and
unrighteousness
of men,
who by their unrighteousness
suppress the truth.

The meanings of these two words overlap throughout Scripture. But there is a general distinction that can be described this way. Ungodliness is evil towards God. And Unrighteousness is evil directed towards fellow men. Of course all sin is towards God. And any evil committed towards God can be labelled unrighteous.

Because people are both ungodly and unrighteous, it is morally good for God to feel anger and administer punishment upon them.

The idea that when a person commits an evil action he deserves just punishment (something called punitive justice) is no longer the primary understanding of justice in our society. I don't think it has been entirely eliminated. But in large part it has been replaced with a different theory of justice altogether. Rather than punitive justice it is now popular to speak of "restorative justice."

Restorative justice is not all bad. If a person steals from another person, rather than simply sending them to jail, it is good to facilitate the restoration of the stolen property and the relationship that has been damaged. As redeemed Christians, we believe in restoration. It is a good thing.

But if you promote restorative justice to the denial of punitive justice, you undermine the very essence of wrath of God. And then, knowingly or unknowingly, you begin to erode the necessity and beauty of the gospel. The Gospel of God is the answer to the punitive justice of God against evil.

Paul believes that all men are justly under the wrath of God. And so, he makes the case that all men are evil: both ungodly and unrighteous. All men are not equally evil. But all men, apart from God's grace, are evil. And, left to themselves, would eventually become fully evil.

This is the doctrine of Total Depravity. Man is not basically good and occasionally makes some mistakes. Man was created in the image of God: knowing God, desiring righteousness and believing truth. But through the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden, all men have become corrupted.

What does this corruption look like?

Paul begins with "ungodliness" and then moves to "unrighteousness".

We will look primarily at “ungodliness” today. All men are ungodly and therefore deserving of God’s inward anger and outward punishment. And therefore, are in desperate need of the Gospel of God found only in Jesus Christ.

Paul begins by establishing that we are ungodly.

How are we all ungodly?

1. We suppress the truth about God.
2. We do not give God the honor He deserves.
3. We do not give thanks to God.

1. We suppress the truth about God.

To suppress means to “hold down, hinder from being known or proclaimed.”

The truth that is being suppressed is the truth of God.

In order to suppress the truth about God, we must all possess truth about God.

¹⁹ For

what can be known about God is plain to them,
because God has shown it to them.

Over the years I have spoken with many people who claim to reject verse 19. They will often tell me that God has done anything but plainly shown himself to them. But verse 19 is absolutely clear. God has made the truth about himself clear to all men. This must be true. If it is not true. If God is somehow hidden from men so that they cannot know him, then it is not just for God to condemn them for not knowing him.

I am reading a book on the Russian Romanov dynasty. There are some names that I am vaguely familiar with like Peter the Great and Catherine the Great or Nicholas II. You may or may not recognize those names. Maybe more of you are familiar with Anastasia from the Disney films. But I would hardly be just to condemn you for not knowing these names. And I could hardly accuse you of suppressing the truth of these people.

But this is precisely what Paul says that all men do with God. And by God, he means the God of the Scripture (not just any concept of God).

I was confronted with this dilemma in my World Religion class in college. The theory promoted in that class was that religion is evolving. Man began with very primitive views of local gods. And as time goes on, there is a movement upward towards a more and more developed understanding of God - towards monotheism – one God, and even later – The Trinity. It wasn’t always explicitly stated, but the guiding premise was that the concept of God was something that came out of man’s striving to know a god who was essentially hidden.

Picture arrows pointing upward – with God as the objective. In some ways this feels right. It is not wrong to say that we are on a quest to know God. This is one reason why the Word of God is so important – it is God’s revelation of himself to us.

But to think that generally speaking men strive to know a hidden God is not the correct picture. Due to sin, ungodliness, our understanding of God does not have a tendency to evolve but rather to devolve. The Bible teaches that we, as fallen men, are continually corrupting the truth of God. The arrows are going in the opposite direction. They are pointing downward, away from God.

The difficulty of knowing God is NOT the fault of God. If it were, then God would not be just in being angry with us. The fault always lies with us. Picture the way information travels from the radio station to the radio in your vehicle. The signal from the radio station may be transmitting just fine. But your receiver must be working and turned on for you to receive the message. If your radio receiver is broken, you cannot blame the radio station for not getting the signal out.

And yet, we constantly blame God for not making himself known to us.

Paul makes it clear: What can be known about God is clear, because God has made it clear.

There are many people in the world who profess to be atheists or agnostics. Agnostics argue that there is not enough evidence to prove the existence of God. Atheists argue that there is enough evidence to the contrary to conclude that there is no God.

If these people were correct, then God could not hold them guilty and punish them for their lack of faith. The agnostic and the atheist may put forth many arguments for their lack of faith, but in the end, these arguments will not stand up on the day of judgment.

Unbelief, at its very core, is not an intellectual problem. It is a moral problem. We, as fallen humans, do not like the God who is. And so, we are constantly holding down some aspect of who God is. We may not all be suppressing the same attributes of God, but we are all suppressing something about God that we find contrary to our own desires. Otherwise, how could God hold us accountable for our suppression of the truth.

It is helpful to think about the history of religion from the Bible. Adam and Eve knew God. God was not merely an Intelligent Designer to them. He was the Supreme Creator. He was Holy. And he was personal. They had direct communication with the true God. After the Fall, they were kicked out of the Garden and so much immediate fellowship with God was lost.

But rather than continuing to meditate upon the true God and to teach the truth of God to their children, they only taught a portion of the truth of God. And, at the same time, the hearts of their children also being corrupt, what truth they were taught, or knew from their own observation of the creation, they also resisted and rejected to some extent. They would then have taught even less to their children. Until we come to the time of the Flood where the evil of men's hearts were constantly doing evil all the time.

What we see is not a gradual increase of knowledge, but rather a continual suppression of knowledge. Only as God intercedes to correct the situation do we find a renewal of truth. The giving of the Law of God in the 10 Commandments is nothing more than God graciously working against the suppression of truth that was constantly occurring.

The moral character of God was clearly written on tablets of stone. And this same moral character of God was displayed in the life of Jesus Christ.

Not everyone has heard of Jesus Christ. That is why we must continue to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And we must continue to send out missionaries.

And not everyone knows the 10 Commandments. So, we must be active in teaching them, especially to the next generation.

But even without ever having heard the name of Jesus Christ, and even without having ever read a Bible, all men are guilty of suppressing the truth about God.

²⁰ For
his invisible attributes,
namely,
his eternal power
and
divine nature,
have been clearly perceived,
ever since the creation of the world,
in the things that have been made.
So
they are without excuse.

On the day of Judgment, when every man, woman or child must stand before Jesus Christ and give account of themselves, we will all be "without excuse." (Without a good defense)

We will not be able to blame God for our failure to know God rightly and to love him supremely.

I often hear people give excuses to defend their own, or others, failure to know and love God.

What about this person?

What about that person?

They seem sincere to me. How could God be angry with them? How could he judge them?

What about the child that grows up in the home where their father, claiming to be a Christian, abused him? What about the man who prays for his wife to be healed only to watch her die a painful death?

What about victims of sexual abuse, or those who grew up in entirely different religions?

These are not easy questions to answer. I acknowledge the difficulties that they present. But as soon as you go down the road that any person has a legitimate excuse before God for their lack of belief, you will no longer accept the just judgment of God upon them.

Paul states, "All men suppress the truth of God in unrighteousness."

And then concludes, "All men are without excuse before God's just wrath.

²¹ For
 although they knew God,
 they did not
 honor him as God
 or
 give thanks to him,
 but
 they became futile in their thinking,
 and
 their foolish hearts were darkened.

Paul assumes here that everyone "knows" God. Or at least, at one time "knew" God.

It is important to point out that the Bible can use the same word "to know" in different ways.

^{ESV} **John 17:3** And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

^{ESV} **John 8:19** They said to him therefore, "Where is your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also."

How can Paul argue that all men "knew" God, and John and Jesus, argue that people still need to know God to find life? It is basically the difference between knowing "of" someone and actually personally knowing them. All men know of God, but not all men personally and intimately are walking in fellowship with God.

All men know enough of God to make them accountable before God, but only those who have been saved by God's sovereign grace truly know God personally and intimately. God has generally made himself known to all men. But God has savingly made himself known only to his elect.

American public education is based upon naturalism and secular humanism. Naturalism only accepts as true what can be observed by the senses. And secular humanism places man at the center life. Both philosophies ignore or deny a Supreme and Moral God as clearly knowable.

Certainly, these philosophies have wreaked havoc among our children. But in one way we should be encouraged. No amount of false teaching will ever be able to completely remove our innate sense of God's existence.

John Frame writes, "The non-Christian's suppression of the truth is never complete. He can never completely eradicate the truth from his consciousness. If he could, he could not live at all. For this is God's world, and all the world's structure, order, meaning is God's work."

The existence of God does not have to be taught to people. And no amount of false teaching can entirely remove the knowledge of God from the heart of any man.

The Bible has much to say about the truth of who God really is. It confronts man's twisting of God's nature. It is corrective.

But the Bible does not itself try to argue people into believing that God exists. It assumes that people know this.

It is important to explain that our knowledge of God is not simply a vague sense of some divine being. Again, if that is all that we knew about God, then we could hardly be accountable before him. Atheism and agnosticism are not the products of intellectual honesty. They are the result of human foolishness, suppressing the truth of God.

We do not inherently know all there is to know about God. For instance, we do not naturally know God's saving love in Jesus Christ, apart from Scripture. But we know enough about the true God to make us accountable on the Day of Judgment.

Paul tells us what all men "know" about God.

Look back in v. 20:

namely,
his eternal power
and
divine nature,

Put simply, all men know that there is One supreme and all-powerful God who has created all things, including men.

And, this One supreme God has a moral nature of which all men are required to emulate.

God is both Sovereign and Personal.

And because of these truths, all men are accountable to God for all of their thoughts, desires, words, and actions. We are required by the very nature of who God is to give him honor and thanks. And this is precisely what we fail to do.

they did not
honor him as God
or
give thanks to him,

What does it mean to honor God?

It means to treat God with the level of dignity and respect that accords with his being and character.

Practically speaking:

It means to love God with your whole heart, not just with some corner of your affections.

- This is why Jesus must be God. He also demands that we give him our supreme devotion.

It means to serve him as your Supreme Master, more than any other master of this world, wanted or unwanted. In every action to have your primary motivation be to obey God and bring him glory.

- Be holy because I am holy.

It means to prioritize the worship of God over every other priority in your life.

- Think of the parable of the banquet in which those who were invited gave every excuse possible for not attending.

It means to live lives of thankfulness to God for all he has given to us.

Giving God the honor he deserves is not only for the most devoted.

All men are required to give God this honor.

And when we fail to do so, we rightly deserve God's anger and wrath.

I once had an email interaction with someone who had been visiting our church. Long before issues of Covid. They explained to me that they were going to have to have an extended season of not coming to Corporate Worship. The reason given: They had many other priorities that needed to be taken care of first. I gently pushed back against their thinking. I said something to the effect of: Don't underestimate the importance and value of Corporate Worship. I would encourage you to look for other things in your schedule that you might let go of before you cut Corporate Worship out entirely. That was the last that I have ever heard from them.

Do you think that developing the practice of godliness is merely a nice suggestion by God? Do you want to find a sort of religion where God does not place any requirements upon you, but you can regularly place requirements upon him?

You see, most people do not even begin to think of someone deserving wrath until they get to crimes that people commit against other humans. Yes, those who take advantage of the weak and helpless are evil. They deserve God's wrath. Sex traffickers and drug lords, they deserve God's wrath. But, they are not the only ones who deserve God's wrath. All who suppress the truth of God and fail to honor God deserve his wrath.

God is not harsh to require this. The truth is that we are most satisfied when we are most honoring God – and enjoying him. God is not harsh. But he does require you to honor him. And to not give him the honor that he deserves justifies his punitive justice.

What happens when we suppress the truth and fail to honor God?
We become more evil.

but
they became futile in their thinking,
and
their foolish hearts were darkened.

became futile in their thinking =
their foolish hearts were darkened =

Becoming futile in our thinking is to have our thinking not be able to achieve its intended goal. When I was in high school I wanted to jump high. Why? Because I wanted to be able to dunk a basketball. After years of doing everything I could possibly think of to increase my ability to jump, I finally realized that I was never going to dunk a basketball. It was futile. Fortunately, my life has not been significantly worse for this failure.

As human beings, your true and highest purpose know God, to glorify God, to enjoy God. This is the first and highest use of your mind. But when you remove God from your highest affections, your thinking becomes futile. It will never be able to achieve the purpose for which it was created.

Ultimately, you will end in frustration. But unlike not being able to dunk a basketball, your futile thinking will have disastrous results.

Our hearts are darkened. Why? Because God is light. And the further we push him from the center of our hearts, the more our hearts are darkened. Not just in our understanding of God, but also in our hearts becoming increasingly unrighteous. Instead of loving good, we increasingly love that which is evil.

22 Claiming to be wise,
they became fools,
23 and
exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images
resembling
mortal man

and
birds
and
animals
and
reptiles.

In Paul's day, he could walk around and see the formal idols that people worshipped. In our day of secular humanism, we would not think of worshipping formal idols. But we are surely just as guilty of spiritual idolatry. How do we do this? We give more honor to the things of this world than we do to God.

Godliness is centering your life around God. It is giving him the honor that he deserves. Ungodliness is pushing God to the side, while giving more honor to the things of this world. Not honoring God is a punishable offense. God's wrath begins with our ungodliness. It does not end there, as we will see next week. But it begins there.

Paul may be making a case for evangelism. People who are not Christians, truly need to repent and trust in Jesus for their salvation. But we need Jesus too. Even as believers, we suppress the truth of God. Surely, we fail to give God the honor he deserves, and the thanks.

We are going to partake of communion. Don't come to him as if you have done all things right. Come to him humbly, acknowledging your sins of ungodliness.

Renew your faith in Jesus.

Come to God thankfully knowing that in Christ Jesus there is no condemnation.

And plead with God for more boldness to share with others the wonder of the Gospel of God in Jesus Christ. For surely, it is God's only provision to the wrath of God.