

April 18, 2001

The Nations Need God's Righteousness

Part 1

Romans 1:18-29

The nations of the world need the righteousness of God because they live under the certain wrath of God.

LTS: Ephesians 2:1-10

This morning I want to talk with you about the wrath of God. But before we begin, I want to remind you that Paul's letter to the Romans is not merely an explanation of the gospel. Rather, Paul is writing this letter to help believers understand how God accomplished our Salvation and how it changes us.

We know he is writing to believers here because he tells us repeatedly.

- (1:7) "those who are loved by God and called to be Saints."
- (1:8) "Their faith is proclaimed in all the world."
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Paul wants believers to understand how God has brought about our salvation. He also knows that, as in every church, there are people who do not fully understand the gospel or have misconceptions about the gospel. So, Paul will strive to refine our thinking about the gospel along the way so that we can see its untarnished glory.

Now, the last time we were together we spent the whole hour talking about versus 16 and 17 which are arguably the most important verses in the New Testament. Verse 17 in fact became the very pillar of the Protestant Reformation; namely, that sinners are justified in the eyes of God by that righteousness of God which is by faith to all who believe.

To say that this is good news may strike us as the understatement of the ages. This is not merely good news. It is great news. It is fantastic news. It is the most important news that human beings have ever heard in the history of the world! No matter who you are or what you have done in this life, you can be reconciled to God. And that reconciliation comes NOT by becoming a better law-keeper, but simply by humbling yourself before God and receiving with the empty hand of faith the gift that God has purchased for you through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ. This, beloved, is the greatest news you'll ever hear in this life.

This is what verses 16-17 are about.

When we come to verse 18, however, Paul appears to unexpectedly and completely change course. In verse 18 he stops talking about the great good news of the saving gospel of God and picks up the terrifying theme of the righteous wrath of God. If the gospel of God is the greatest news anyone we will ever hear, the wrath of God is the worst news anyone will ever hear.

- Forget about the bad news that comes out of Washington.
- Forget about the fear of Iran and their growing nuclear capabilities.
- Forget about Climate Change and Sea Rise.
- If you want something to worry about, then worry about this – that the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. In contrast to the good news of the gospel, this is the worst bad news anyone alive today should concern himself about.
- More than anything else, people among the nations of the world should be concerned about the righteous wrath of the thrice Holy and omnipotent God.

In verse 17 Paul tells us that in the Gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed. In verses 18, however, he says, “The wrath of God is revealed.

Why does Paul make this abrupt U-turn in the flow of his letter? He does it because no one will never fully apprehend the glory of the good news until he first understands the terror of the bad news. In order for people to fully appreciate the brilliant glory of God that beams forth from the manifold facets of this gospel diamond, Paul must lay it before us upon the black contrast of the wrath of God.

This is where Paul begins unpacking the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He starts by telling us that...

I. All people are Under the wrath of God

Read. V. 18.

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

1. The reason people should fly to the gospel of Jesus Christ is because the righteous and holy wrath of God hangs over the heads of every sinner like Damocles sword. The problem, however, is that many people don't want to hear about the gospel because they know nothing of the law of

God and all they have ever heard about is the God who is love. The God of the modern church is a God who is never angry at anyone. He is a god who is infinitely patient and kind and never willing that any should perish. The theology that such churches teach has no category for...

- the justice of God
- the holiness of God
- the righteousness of God
- or the wrath of God.

2. Of course it is true that God's unconditional love rests upon everyone who has been reconciled to God through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the whole of scripture warns sinners about the wrath of God. For example:

- Genesis tells us that The whole world, with the exception of Noah and his family, was destroyed when God unleashed a world-wide flood because of their universal rebellion against God.
- Sodom and Gomorrah were summarily destroyed by the wrath of God from heaven because of their rebellion against God.
- Pharaoh and all of Egypt experience the wrath unleashed from heaven because of their rebellion against God.
- (Lev. 10:1-2) Nadab and Abihu (Aaron's sons) were struck down by God's wrath for offering Strange Fire contrary to God's clear command.
- And at the end of the Bible (Rev. 16) we learn about a future time when God will pour out the bowls of the fury of His wrath upon the inhabitants of earth.
- "In each case" (says William Hendriksen) "scripture shows that these manifestations of wrath have their origin in heaven. It is God, dwelling in heaven, who vents his wrath upon the perpetrators of ungodliness and unrighteousness."¹

3. Now I suspect that many of you younger people have never heard a sermon on the wrath and judgment of God. As pastoral parenthesis, let me just emphasize the importance of making sure that you always belong to a church that is committed to expository preaching. Perhaps you have never considered this before, but you should understand that churches that consistently preach topical messages are only feeding God's people what the pastor wants you to hear. If he is uncomfortable with preaching about certain doctrines and values of the Bible, he will just skip over them. And no one will even notice because everyone in the church has grown accustomed to allowing the pastor to determine what the congregation will hear and NOT hear.

¹ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans: New Testament Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1980), 68

4. But if the pastor of your church is preaching verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book by book through the Bible, he doesn't have the luxury of skipping certain passages and truths that might make people feel uncomfortable. And if he does skip something, everyone will know. How's that for accountability?

5. The reason I am preaching on the wrath of God today is because it is the next thing God has to say to us. I don't get to pick and choose what you will hear. My job is to deliver to you the whole counsel of God, and there is nothing I can imagine that could bring more delight.

6. With that in mind, let me offer a short introduction to the doctrine of the wrath of God or the judgment of God.

A. First, God's judgment is certain.

- a. Ecc. 12:14 tells us that God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.
- b. There is much talk today about injustice in the world, but with God, every act of injustice and unrighteousness will be brought before the Almighty whose judgment is perfect and final.

B. God's Judgment is Righteous:

- a. Gen. 18:25 Abraham was concerned that when God's rained down fire upon Sodom he might destroy the righteous along with the wicked. So he declared, "far be it from you, oh God! Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?"
- b. Psa. 9:7-8 the psalmist writes, "the Lord sits On the throne forever; he has established his throne for justice, and he judges the world with righteousness; He judges the people with uprightness.
- c. So God's judgment is righteous.

C. God's Judgment is impartial.

- a. God is no respecter of persons. He isn't influenced by threats or bribes. In 2 Chron. 17:7 we read, "now then, let the fear of the Lord be upon you. Be careful what you do, for there is no injustice with the Lord our God, or partiality or taking bribes."
- b. In Job. 34:19 we read, "God shows no partiality two Princes, nor regards the rich more than the poor, for they are all the work of his hands.
- c. So God's judgment and wrath are Certain, Righteous and Impartial.

6. Why does God bring wrath and judgment upon people and nations?

A. To display his majestic glory:

- a) Isa. 59:18-19, “according to their deeds, so will he repay, wrath to his adversaries, repayment to his enemies; to the coastlands he will render payment. So they shall fear the name of the Lord from the West, and his glory from the rising of the sun; for he will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of the Lord drives.
- b) So, God brings wrath to reveal His glory.

B. To vindicate the righteous and defend the weak

- a) Psa. 140:12, “I know that the Lord will maintain the cause of the afflicted and will execute justice for the needy.”
- b) See Psa. 7:8-9.

C. God brings wrath to punishes sin:

- a) Psalm 1, “the wicked are like the chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”
- b) Heb. 10:26, “for if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think will be deserved by the one who has trampled under foot the son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “vengeance is mine; I will repay.”
- c) Finally, God brings wrath and judgment...

D. To bring salvation to His people.

- a) Ex. 6:6 the Lord says to Moses, “say therefore to the people of Israel, ‘I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment.’”
- b) An one final example: The greatest example of God’s wrath bringing salvation is when he poured out in fullest measure the crushing wrath of His judgment upon His own Son so we might be saved. The hymn-writer was correct when he

declared, “In my place condemned He stood.” He bore the strokes that we deserved. His judgment was our salvation.

7. Beloved, this is but a taste of the rich, soul-refreshing, doctrine of the Judgment and Wrath of God. God’s wrath and judgment are

- A. Certain, Righteous and Impartial.
- B. They display God’s glory
- C. They vindicate the righteous and defend the weak,
- D. They Punish sin and bring salvation.
- E. Why would any preacher choose to withhold such rich spiritual food from the precious people of God?
- F. As one theologian has comments, “if God had no righteous anger and wrath, he would not be God, just as surely as he would not be God without his gracious love. He perfectly hates just as he perfectly loves - perfectly loving righteousness and perfectly hating evil (Psa. 45:7; Heb. 1:9).”²

8. If I might offer another pastoral parenthesis, it bears noting that the absence of teaching on the wrath of God is evident today NOT only in modern preaching, but in modern worship music as well. With few exceptions, the songs believers sing in church focus on spiritual victory, overcoming fear, the power to fight the devil and the promise of heaven. Seldom will you hear a worship team lead a congregation in singing about the wrath of God and how Jesus bore it in our place. On the other hand, I praise the Lord for the few who are seeking to correct the imbalance, and for Kyle and the team whom I think successfully strikes that balance week after week.

9. The question that presents itself in this part of our text is, why? Why is the wrath of God currently being revealed against the nations? Later on Paul will tell us HOW the wrath of God is being revealed, but for now, the question is, WHY is it being revealed? I want to submit to you that the text before us reveals three reasons why the wrath of God is being revealed against the nations (including the nation of The United States of America).

The first reason why the wrath of God is being revealed against the nations is because...

II. They Suppress the truth of God

² John MacArthur, *Romans 1-8: The MacArthur N.T. Commentary*, (Chicago, Moody, 1991), 60

1. To begin, let me make an observation about the text we are examining. Paul wants us to understand that all sinners are under the wrath of God. But in the Jewish mind there are actually two categories of people in the world, Jews and Gentiles. This becomes more important later in the letter when Paul begins addressing how a church that consists of both Jews and Gentiles must get along and even love one another. For our purposes, however, we simply need to know that Paul acknowledges the two categories of Jew and Gentile.
2. This is important here because in chapters 2+3 he will talk about how the wrath of God is revealed specifically against the ungodliness of the Jews. Here in chapter one, however, (beginning with v. 18) he is specifically speaking about God's wrath revealed against Gentiles.
3. The word for "Gentile" in Romans is *Ethnos*, meaning a People, Race or Nation. Hence my use of the term "Nations" throughout this message.
4. Now, Paul has already established the fact that the wrath of God is being revealed (or poured out) upon the Gentiles. And while there may be many manifestations of ungodliness and unrighteousness that warrant God's wrath against them, there is one sin in particular that has earned his righteous anger.

Read 18b-19

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

5. The one sin against which God is angry, furious, and wrathful; the one sin that that is both unrighteous and ungodly (or immoral), the one sin that provokes his anger among the nations is a universal sin. That is, it is a sin that is committed by every human being. What is that sin? It is the sin of suppressing truth. More specifically, it is the sin of suppressing the truth about God.
6. In the original language, the word for "suppress" (Katakew) means "To hinder," "to stifle," "to incarcerate," "to put in detention," "to obscure," "to suppress," or "to repress."
7. Illustrating the meaning of this word, R.C. Sproul explains that it compares to
...the idea a gigantic spring or a coil that in order to compress that coil you would have to use all of the strength in your body to push it down. And... while you're pushing it down it's resisting your strength and it's [pressing back] against you, wanting to... recoil into its original position.

What Paul is telling us (says Sproul) is that we take that truth of God and we press it down. We [do whatever we need to do] to get it out of our mind. [Nevertheless], all of the strength that we use to suppress the truth of God simply

cannot eradicate it. We can't get rid of it because it is always and everywhere pushing back up trying to come again to the surface.³

8. Paul is telling us that all sinners have a propensity for denying the existence of God even though God has made his existence obvious. It's not some kind of hidden knowledge that only an elite group of people can understand. NO! His existence is plain, its manifest, it's clear to every human being.

9. Why is God's existence clear to every person? Its because God is the one who has made it clear. God has so designed man and the world in which he lives that it is impossible for us to NOT realize that there is a God.

10. Some who are listening to me right now would self-identify as agnostics. They don't want to throw down the gauntlet and declare there is NO God. They just want to say, "I'm not sure," or "there isn't enough information too draw a firm conclusion about the possibility of the existence of God. You offer the excuse that you are A-Ginosis – "without knowledge." Incidentally, in the Latin the word is "*ignoramous*."

11. But friend, God doesn't allow that option! You see, when you claim to be agnostic, not only are you denying God, but you are blaming Him for NOT providing sufficient data to decisivdly conclude that that he exists. You see, this is the very reason the wrath of God is being revealed! God has not hidden Himself to make it hard for people to find and believe in him. No! He has intentionally and deliberately made His existence obvious and has given man the capacity to look at the evidence and draw the obvious conclusion.

12. You see, the reason God is angry with man is NOT because man has an information problem or an intelligence problem, but because he has a moral problem. He is born with the knowledge of God within him and the evidence for God is all around him, but he choses to deny the undeniable. He suppresses the truth about God.

13. Over the years some of you may have been confused when I repeatedly said that "God doesn't believe in atheists." This text is the proof. All humans, by nature, know there is a God. But their hatred of God leads them to deny Him. For this reason, the wrath of God is revealed.

14. Why is the wrath of God revealed from heaven against the nations? First, because they Suppress the truth about God.

There are two more reasons that we need to discuss, but you will need to come back next week to hear it.

³ R.C. Sproul, Sermon on Romans 1:18-25

