

Sermons through

Romans

The Revealed Wrath

Romans 1:18

With Study Questions

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For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, ¹⁹ because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, ²¹ because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things ²⁴ Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen (Romans 1:18-25).

Introduction

Many years ago I was leading a Bible-study where a young woman made the observation that she was surprised (in light of the convictions and directions we as a culture or nation had been embracing ethically and politically) that we had not yet been judged by God.

To this day there are two complaints I hear with great regularity from Christians and non-Christians alike. Some criticize God for His austerity and wrath while others find fault in God for His inactivity in the course of human affairs. I'd like to respond to these criticisms in a moment, but we might consider asking ourselves just what we think the wrath of God (realizing it is a somewhat archaic term for most of us) might look like. Would you know the wrath of God if you saw it? We tend to think earthquakes and lightning bolts. Whereas it may include natural phenomena, it certainly isn't restricted to that. We might be surprised to read what the Apostle Paul includes in what the wrath of God looks like.

These above verses contain numerous proof-texts (verses in the Bible used to make a theological point) commonly used in forming a sound approach to both apologetics (a rational and reasonable defense of the

faith) and evangelism (the proclaiming of the gospel). R. C. Sproul commented that he has likely spent more time on this passage than any other in Scripture.

There is a temptation, therefore, to launch into the many different themes and arguments for which these verses provide ample foundation. My goal over the next few weeks will be to neither ignore those themes and arguments nor allow them to wrench us from the context of this epistle. My priority, nonetheless, will be to attempt to address Paul's immediate concern in writing these things.

Toward that end (of knowing Paul's primary concern in this passage) we must notice a series of conjunctions "**for**" *gar* and "**therefore**" *dioti* tying all of Paul's words into a unified progression of thought. We should not think of these verses as isolated planets wandering through their own rotations and spinning on their own axes with no regard to the solar system as a whole.

Paul's progression of thought begins in verse 15 with Paul explaining that he is eager to "**preach the gospel**" followed by the conjunctions:

- "*for*" he is not "ashamed of the gospel" (vs 16).
- "*for* in it the righteousness of God is revealed" (vs 17).
- "*for* the wrath of God is revealed" (vs 18).
- "*therefore* (though it is translated because) what may be known of God is manifest in them" (vs 19).
- "*for* since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen" (vs 20).
- "*therefore*" (also translated 'because') although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God" (vs 21).

In an attempt to reduce these conjunctions down to two major themes: 1) "*for*" the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel and the 2) "*for*" the wrath of God is revealed in the human behavior that we observe. Or perhaps we can say it this way: the righteousness which comes from God is revealed by special revelation (the Scriptures – specifically the gospel) the wrath of God is revealed by general revelation (by the world which we observe).

Paul is explaining what is happening in the world – the wrath of God being revealed. He also explains why – because of the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in that unrighteousness.

The truth that all men suppress, Paul will explain, is the knowledge of God that all men have. Every person knows of the true God – conventionally referred to as “general revelation.” All men know this because God has shown it (“it” being the truth of the true God’s existence) to them and therefore it is manifest [clearly known] in them. This is not a matter of probability; it is certainty – so much so that men are “**without excuse**” (Romans 1:20).

Paul will then begin to explain where this suppression of truth and knowledge of God leads. We will read of things like: futility of thought, foolish darkened hearts (vs 21), a profession of wisdom but actual folly (vs 22) and an exchange of the glory of the true and incorruptible God for that which is corruptible (vs 23).

We see another “**therefore**” in verse 24 with the terrifying explanation of God, essentially, letting sinful men have what they want and the consequential dishonoring of their own bodies along with the worshiping of the creature rather than the Creator (vs 24, 25).

This amazing testimony regarding the nature of man, or what we might call biblical anthropology (which will continue for some three chapters), is an explanation for why Paul is eager to preach the gospel. It is man’s only hope. Man is inflicted with the incurable disease of sin and all the medicine and every treatment which erupts from the dark caves of human ingenuity and innovation merely exacerbates the problem. Paul begins his explanation:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18).

The Wrath of God

In reference to the two complaints – God’s wrath or lethargy, there are two responses: God is very active in His wrath and He is to be worshiped for it.

We tend to think of wrath, especially as it relates to the behavior of humans, as unbridled fury. In fact the Greek word for wrath *orge* has been used in cultures to describe a blatant disregard for what is appropriate in pursuit of carnal desires. In that sense the word is used to present God in a somewhat anthropomorphic way (as if God were a man). But, of course,

God is not at the mercy of human or carnal passions. And in the Bible wrath can be defined as

...the settled and active opposition of God's holy nature to everything that is evil.¹

It is for this reason that we should rejoice that God is wrathful against sin. People who object to God's holiness and wrath don't know what they're asking for. To live in a creation where there is no objective, settled and active opposition to evil would make all of the created order more akin to hell than utopia and the vast majority of human history has proven that point.

Of course the wrath of God creates its own problems – for who can escape it? Amidst all the evil we cry for justice only to come to realize that justice is the last thing on earth we actually want. We ought to praise God for His intolerance of evil, but what of our own evil?

Here again we revert back to why the apostle is so eager to preach the gospel. For even though it is not explicitly stated in this passage, clearly contained in the gospel is the message regarding where the wrath of God lands for those who trust in Christ.

Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But He *was* wounded for our transgressions, *He was* bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace *was* upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:4-6).

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit (1 Peter 3:18).

¹ Morris, L. (1988). *The Epistle to the Romans* (76). Grand Rapids, Mich.; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

Revealed

The teaching here is that the wrath of God is “**revealed.**” At the beginning it would appear that Paul is explaining why he is eager to preach the gospel – because of two things that are “revealed” *apokaluptetai*. The righteousness of God is “revealed” in the gospel. The wrath of God is also “revealed” in general revelation by the observation of human behavior.

In other words, the righteousness which comes by faith is revealed to those who hear the gospel preached (special revelation) but the wrath of God is seen by all who merely observe the human race. When the girl in the Bible study said she was surprised that we had not yet been judged, she spoke amiss.

Not to jump too far ahead of myself (for this will be addressed in a future message) but the judgment is God letting allowing sinful men to do what sinful men desire to do – God giving men up to the “**lusts of their hearts**” (**Romans 1:24**). The wrath of God is found in God letting people follow their own inclinations.²

Ungodliness and Unrighteousness

Paul goes on to explain that the wrath of God is revealed against all “**Ungodliness and unrighteousness.**”

Ungodliness *asebeian* means a general lack of piety. It means to seek to live in a world as if there is no God. For many today this has become a noble quest. A friend recently explained to me his vision for a world

...politicians will be able to openly declare themselves to be non-believers and actually have a chance of being elected to a higher office. Some day far in the future, intelligence, logic, and common sense will become the most important qualifications for leading a Country. As humans evolve, faith, religion, and the belief in Gods will fade over time, just as the belief in Santa Clause and the Easter Bunny fade as a child evolves.

² If I recall correctly, the girl in the Bible study was responding to the topic of abortion. One would be hard-pressed to imagine a greater judgment than the slaughter of a people’s innocent babies. Add to that the judgment of such seared consciences that we would fail to even recognize darkness by which we are surrounded.

It somehow escaped my friend's attention that the twentieth century hosted quite a line-up of fully evolved politicians who openly declared themselves unbelievers (Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tse-Tung, etc.) These were "Intelligent, logical, sensible" individuals who were responsible for the deaths of more innocent citizens than all the holy wars in history put together. Ungodliness is the foundation of unrighteousness and "unrighteousness" *adikia* does not merely mean evil but injustice as well.

Suppressed in Unrighteousness

Finally Paul explains the root (at least from the perspective of human culpability) cause of this problem; it is the suppression of the truth in unrighteousness. Before I conclude there is one thing of which I would like us all to be reminded – that this is Paul's explanation regarding his eagerness to preach the gospel. I mention this because we tend to view this (and rightfully so at some level) as a way we might view others. But this shouldn't be merely viewed as the team of "us and God" against the world. We must remember to include ourselves in this equation. Paul elsewhere reminds us:

And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins, ² in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, ³ among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others (Ephesians 2:1-3).

So believer, this was you and unbeliever this is you. The universal consequence of sin is not that we are not surrounded by truth and even know the truth (and by truth we are speaking of the essence of truth as it relates to the Triune living God); the problem is that we suppress the truth (suppress is "present active participle" which means it is something that we actively and consistently do).

The image Paul seems to be painting with this word *katechonton* would be the act of holding a spring down or an inflated ball or raft under water. And the motive for this suppression is unrighteousness; it is a

selfish sinful desire to remove the truth from the equation of our existence. This may sound like a remarkably negative testimony against the human race – and it is. It also provides an iron-clad indictment against the claims of innocence so regularly uttered maintained by the lips of sinners.

But it also gives us cause for praise when we consider that it is this active rebellion against a holy God that that very God subdues and remits in the gospel of His Son. Can it possibly be said any better than the apostle himself in his completion of the above thought:

And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins, ² in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, ³ among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. ⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶ and raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus, ⁷ that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, lest anyone should boast. ¹⁰ For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:1-10).

It does not enter into the mind of man to walk in God's good works in any genuine sense until the "**But God**" of verse 4. It is the God who is "**rich in mercy**" and loves with "**great love**" that Paul writes of. It is the universal sinfulness, ungodliness and unrighteousness of man that serves to highlight the heart of the message, the message of the gospel as man's only hope.

Questions for Study

1. Are you surprised God has not judged our nation/culture/church? Has He (page 2)?
2. What do the conjunctions tell us about the passage we're examining? What are the two major themes (pages 3, 4)?
3. What is 'wrath' and why should God be worshiped for His wrath (pages 4, 5)?
4. Is the wrath of God seen in the cross? What does that mean to us (pages 4, 5)?
5. What are the two things revealed in Romans 1:17, 18 (page 6)?
6. Define and discuss 'ungodliness' and 'unrighteousness.' What are the implications of these attributes (pages 6, 7)?
7. What does the natural, sinful man do with the truth? Explain what this might look like (pages 7, 8)?
8. How does all the affect your own understanding of your own faith (pages 7, 8)?

