

Suppressing the Truth: Romans 1:18-23
 Ben Reaach, Three Rivers Grace Church
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Last week we studied the theme statement of this letter—verses 16-17. Next Paul begins the first major section of the letter, and what he establishes first of all is the sinfulness of all humanity. As he moves from the statements about the gospel in verses 16-17 to the discussion of God’s wrath against sin in verses 18 and following, the flow of thought goes something like this: The gospel saves those who believe. And then there’s the implicit question, “Why do I need the gospel? What do I need to be saved from? Why is this necessary?” And the answer comes in verse 18, “because the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men . . .” So, you see, he’s giving a rationale for why we so desperately need the gospel. From 1:18 through 3:20 Paul is going to be very clear about our depravity and the fact that it plagues every one of us—Gentiles and Jews. We are all sinners who deserve to be destroyed by God’s wrath.

This is not gospel per se. It is not good news in and of itself. But it is a necessary component to understanding the gospel. If someone came up to you and said they had a cure, you would say, “A cure for what?” You would want to know what the disease is that it’s supposed to cure. And before you would have any interest in this cure, you would have to be convinced 1) that the disease is for real, 2) that you have this disease, and 3) that the cure really works.

Well, Paul begins to expound the gospel message to us by first establishing the fact that we have the most horrible of diseases, and we can’t blame anybody else for it. We are sinners. Only when we see our depravity for what it is will we then be able to glory in the good news that Jesus Christ died to take our punishment and His righteousness is credited to us by faith. Those truths will have no significance for us if we don’t first of all understand the problem of sin.

For an outline this morning, first, we’ll consider the wrath of God. Second, God’s revelation of Himself in creation. Third, suppressing the truth. And finally, effects of suppressing the truth.

The Wrath of God

Many try to deny the wrath of God. This is not the way folks like to think about God. And so they fashion a god to their own liking. Richard Niebuhr criticized this way of thinking by describing it this way: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a

Christ without a cross.”¹ If you try to deny God’s wrath, you’ll end up gutting the entire gospel message. And you’ll end up with a very skewed picture of God. God is a God of justice and righteousness and holiness. He is perfect, sinless, and entirely good. And God would not be good, if He did not hate what is evil. Therefore, God’s wrath is one of His many perfections. God’s wrath is not something we should be embarrassed to talk about. It’s not something we should feel weird or sheepish about. It’s not something we should think of as a defect in His character. No, this is something to praise Him for. We should honor Him and thank Him and extol Him as the perfect judge who will exercise justice in the universe and set everything right in the end.

Now, we do need to be clear that God’s wrath is very different than the wrath of sinful human beings like us. It may be difficult for you to think of God’s wrath as a good thing if you’ve been deeply wounded by the sinful wrath of someone in your family. Maybe you’ve seen so much horrific destruction caused by selfish anger, that it’s hard for you to imagine righteous anger.

But God’s wrath is never sinful. Nor is it out of control. It is entirely just, and it is perfectly measured. God’s anger against sin is just as it should be. He is not more angry than He should be, or less angry than He should be. His anger *is* intense, make no mistake about that. But that is just as it should be, because our sin against God is an infinite offense to His glory.

God is jealous for His glory. We saw the phrase back in verse 5, “for the sake of his name,” and noted that everything is for the sake of God’s glory. God does everything He does for the purpose of displaying His greatness. Therefore, when sinful humanity exchanges the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things, that incites God’s fierce anger.

I listened to a sermon by Tom Schreiner this week of him preaching on this text, and he shared a story about his son, Daniel, whom some of us know. He said that when Daniel was 6, 7, or 8, they were in the car on the way home from church one Sunday, and Daniel asked a very insightful question for a kid of that age. He said, “Dad, why is it OK for God to glorify Himself, but it’s not OK for me to do the same thing?” And the simple answer that Tom gave him was this: “Daniel, it’s because God is God, and you are not!”

That’s the simple answer. God is the Almighty Creator and Sustainer of the universe, and it is appropriate for Him to glorify Himself. We are finite, sinful human beings. And it is actually good and loving for God to glorify Himself, because the display of His glory is what we need more than anything else. It’s not as

¹ Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, published 1937, page 193.

though God's goal to glorify Himself is bad for us. It's the absolute best thing for us! That's what we so desperately need and want, even if we don't realize that. We desire to behold the glory of God. That is what will satisfy us for all eternity in heaven.

So it's a very good thing for God to reveal His glory and call forth praise to His Name, and it's also a very good thing for God to exercise His wrath against those who will not praise Him, but instead scorn Him by praising lesser things.

God's wrath will be manifest in a full way on the judgment Day. In the next chapter, in 2:5, there's a reference to "the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed." God's wrath is also revealed now in God "giving people up" to sin. That's the phrase that we read three times in chapter 1. Verse 24, "Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity." Verse 26, "For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions." Verse 28, "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done." It has been said that "The history of the world is the judgment of the world."² And that's certainly the message of the latter half of Romans 1. We see God's judgment upon the world in a frightening way in this age in the fact that God leaves so many to their own sinful ways. This is the righteous wrath of God. It should cause us to fear God. And for those who are unbelievers, this should make you think very seriously about your relationship with God. You need to repent of your sin and come to Jesus, or God's wrath will remain against you. For those who are believers, the truth of God's wrath should make us fall on our faces before Him and thank Him for saving us. And it should also make us plead with Him to have mercy on our city and our nation and our world. We desire to see many others saved from His wrath through the power of the gospel.

God's Revelation of Himself in Creation

The next thing we need to see in this text is how God has revealed Himself in creation. Verse 19 says, "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 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." This is what theologians call general revelation, in order to distinguish it from special revelation. General revelation is God's revelation of Himself to all mankind (generally) through the things we can all observe in nature. Special revelation, on the other hand, is what we have in Scripture. God reveals Himself very clearly (in a

² Schiller, quoted in Moo, *Romans*, page 101.

special way) to His people in the Old and New Testaments. And it's through this special revelation that we know the Gospel.

This is an important thing to understand about the difference between general revelation and special revelation. God's general revelation that comes through nature is not sufficient to save. Some people have tried to argue that individuals can come to saving faith through general revelation, but that's not what Paul is saying. Individuals must hear the Gospel message that comes only through special revelation. As Romans 10:14 says, "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" This is why we need frontier missionaries. This is why people need to go to the unreached people groups of the world, because the message contained in the Bible needs to be proclaimed in order for people to be saved. They can't just look at a sunset and understand the Gospel. They need to know who Jesus is, and what He did to save sinners.

Paul's point about general revelation is not that general revelation can save. It can't. But general revelation is sufficient to condemn. That's what Paul says at the very end of verse 20. "So they are without excuse." That's Paul's point in what he says about how God reveals Himself in creation. God does not reveal Himself in creation in a way that directly brings people to saving faith. But God does reveal Himself in creation in such a way that all humanity, deep down within them, have a knowledge that a Creator exists to whom they are accountable. And we have a conscience as well, which verse 32 alludes to. "Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them."

We see the fingerprint of God on this world that He has made, and we have a moral sense within us. And therefore we have no excuse for our rebellion. Nobody will be able to stand before God on judgment day and say to Him, "But I didn't know. I didn't know there was a Creator. I thought I could live however I wanted to. I didn't know that there's a moral right and wrong. I thought that I could determine right and wrong for myself." There are certainly many who would attempt that kind of argument, but God calls the bluff. No excuses! There is the testimony of nature. There is the testimony of our own conscience. We are accountable.

This has important ramifications for how we think about missions. This should give us great urgency in going to the ends of the earth with the Gospel, because there are people groups who do not know the Good News, and they are under God's wrath.

Another point we should remember from this is that we already have some common ground with those unreached people groups. They have a knowledge of God from God's creation which they see around them.

In Don Richardson's book, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, he tells of the Gedeo people of Ethiopia. They believed in a benevolent god they called *Magano*, and they feared an evil being they called *Sheit'an*, to whom they made sacrifices. Not many of the people prayed, but there was one man, Warrasa Wange, who prayed fervently to *Magano* that he would reveal himself to the people. Then Warrasa had a vision. In his vision he saw two white-skinned men come and set up shelters under the shade of a sycamore tree near his town. And then, in the vision, Warrasa heard a voice that told him, "These men will bring you a message from *Magano*, the God you seek. Wait for them." So he waited. And he waited. And he continued to wait. And several others must have had visions as well, because they prophesied that strangers would be coming with a message from *Magano*.

It was 8 years after Warrasa's vision, in 1948, that two Canadian missionaries showed up in that town. Albert Brant and Glen Cain wanted to begin their work in a more central location, but because of the political situation at the time they were advised to go to this town on the outskirts of the Gedeo population. As they drove up in their old truck, they sought shade under a large sycamore tree. Warrasa heard their vehicle, and slowly headed over toward them. He became one of the first of many, many converts.³

I think that story is a great illustration of how God works through general revelation and special revelation. Warrasa knew that God exists. But he also knew that the people needed God to reveal Himself to them. So he prayed. And God gave him this vision, and then God brought missionaries to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

God has revealed Himself in nature, not in a saving way, but in a way that shows all humanity that there is a God. And we are accountable to Him. And we ought to seek further knowledge of Him. The downward spiral of sin is not the fault of God for failing to reveal Himself. The problem is that we suppress the truth.

Suppressing the Truth

This is in verse 18. This is what stirs up God's anger. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness *suppress the truth*." And then also in verse 21, "For *although they*

³ Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, pages 48-50.

knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him . . .” Again, there is this knowledge of God, but sinners suppress that truth in order to pursue ungodly and unrighteous living.

When I’ve interacted with agnostics or atheists, I’ve tried to point to the fact that this is not just an intellectual issue. The main issue is not that you’re having trouble with the problem of evil or that you have doubts about the inerrancy of Scripture. Those are worthwhile issues to talk about, but that’s not the root issue that’s keeping you from submitting to Jesus Christ. The real issue is your rebellion against God. The real issue is that you want to be autonomous and independent. You don’t want to be responsible to obey the commands of God. You want to be able to sleep with your girlfriend and try not to feel guilty about it. You want to be able to create your own morality. You want to be able to live however you want to live. And so you suppress the truth.

It’s amazing to observe the intellectual energy that goes into suppressing the truth. Brilliant scientists work tirelessly to explain the universe in a way that denies God. What a clear example that is, and a sad example, of suppressing the truth. God’s glory is seen so powerfully in the world around us. Whether it’s the stars you can see through a telescope, or the cells you can see under a microscope, it has the fingerprints of God all over it. And yet men and women in various fields of research are working diligently to explain it all from an atheistic framework.

Stephen Meyer is a scientist who is part of the intelligent design movement, and he has written a book entitled, *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design*. Other scientists have looked into various aspects of creation and have noted many compelling features that point to a designer. Stephen Meyer looks specifically at the information that is embedded in DNA. He comments on how scientists who are committed to the evolutionary theory have to constantly reason away the evidences of design. For instance, Francis Crick, who along with James Watson, discovered the DNA double helix, said that “biologists must constantly keep in mind that what they see was not designed, but evolved.”⁴

That’s the suppression of truth. The evidences of design are right there in front of all of us, and most profoundly evident to those scientists who are spending much time and energy and investing incredible intellectual energy into understanding nature. These things have design written all over them, and yet so many of these scientists are repeating this mantra to themselves, “it was not designed, it evolved. As much as it looks like it was designed, that cannot be the case. That conclusion is simply unacceptable. I must believe that it evolved.”

⁴ Quoted in Stephen Meyer, *Signature in the Cell*, page 20.

Effects of Suppressing the Truth

Let's look, finally, and the effects of suppressing the truth. And this will continue next week and the following week as we look at the remaining verses in Romans 1. When God's wrath is manifest in leaving sinners to their own ways, there are all kinds of perversity—sexual impurity, unnatural sexual relations, homosexuality, and a list at the end of the chapter that includes everything from disobeying your parents to murder. These are some of the effects of suppressing the truth. Humanity sees the fingerprint of God in nature, and yet suppresses that knowledge and lives like there is no God.

From our text for this morning, I'll mention 4 things briefly that go along with suppressing the truth. First is the failure to honor God. Verse 21, "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God." This is what is so offensive about the suppression of truth. God, who deserves all honor and glory and praise, is dismissed as fiction.

And the second thing, which goes along with this, is ungratefulness. Verse 21 continues, "they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him." Imagine if you spent a great deal of time knitting a sweater for one of your children to give them on their birthday, or you built a bunk bed for them, or you worked on a painting or a sculpture. And then, when the big day came to give them the present, they didn't thank you at all, but instead made up some story about the sweater coming a sibling's closet, or the bunk bed coming from a yard sale, or the painting or sculpture just appearing out of nowhere. You would be flabbergasted. You would be appalled. You would be thinking, "I made this especially for you, and you're making up stories about it coming from somewhere else! How could you do that to me?" That would be just a taste of what God experiences day after day.

A third effect of suppressing the truth that we see in our text is foolishness. This is in the second part of verse 21 and also verse 22, "they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools." This is the insane arrogance of depravity. There is the presumption of wisdom, but it's just an illusion. People think they are so smart, so intelligent, so up-to-date with the trendy philosophical ideas of the day, so enamored by pop-psychology. But in God's eyes, it's absolute absurdity. Individuals may be able to wax eloquent about relationships, morals, personal achievement, success, purpose in life, peace, prosperity. But where their message contradicts the truths and absolutes of Scripture, they are conveying nothing but foolishness. They may sound very wise. They may have all the credentials and all the success that this world applauds. They may have lots of data, lots of complex ideas, and it may sound like their

conclusions are well-researched and well-reasoned. But if they're using all of that to justify some sin, then we need to recognize that they're suppressing the truth. This is what we encounter so often in discussions about sexuality and homosexuality, which we'll be looking at more next week in the following verses. All kinds of wise-sounding arguments are presented for free love and homosexual love, but it's utter foolishness. It's the effect of suppressing the truth and rebelling against God's decrees.

In another passage Paul writes something very similar, even using similar language. In Ephesians 4:17-19 he says, "Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the *futility* of their minds. They are *darkened* in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity." These are frightening descriptions of what happens when humanity suppresses the truth in rebellion against God.

The fourth effect of suppressing the truth (and the last one I'll highlight this morning), is idolatry. This is what Paul is talking about when he says in verse 23 that they "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things." This is what idolatry is—turning away from the glory of God and instead worshipping created things. I mentioned earlier that the phrase, "God gave them up," is used three times here. The word, "exchanged," is also used three times. It's used again in verse 25, "they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen." And then also in verse 26 speaking of the sexual perversion of homosexuality—exchanging what is natural for what is contrary to nature. This is what happens when God's truth is suppressed by sinful human beings. Instead of seeing God's glory manifest in creation, sinners worship created things instead of the Creator.

An infamous example of idolatry was when the Israelites made the golden calf. Moses was up on the mountain hearing from the Lord, and it seemed that he was taking too long. So the people told Aaron to make gods for them. And Aaron instructed them to take off their rings and jewelry, and he made it into the image of a calf and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" And the people made burnt offerings and peace offerings to it, and they had a feast. (Exodus 32)

Psalm 106:20 describes the situation in these words, which Paul echoes in Romans 1. "They made a calf in Horeb and worshiped a metal image. They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass." They thought they were so clever.

They thought they had such a good idea, given the circumstances. But it was blatant idolatry, utter foolishness, ungrateful toward God, and terribly dishonoring to Him.

These are the shocking displays of sin that the Bible describes for us, and which we see still in our world today. This is what we need to be rescued from. Many of us here have been rescued, by the grace of God. God has saved us from our own foolish desire to suppress the truth. He has granted us repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ, who died for sinners. And therefore we rejoice that the wrath of God is no longer against us. We are saved, which means that instead of punishment, we will get reward.

Some here may still be trapped in the darkness of futile thinking, in the foolishness of suppressing the truth. I pray that today will be the day of deliverance for you. Turn away from your idols, and let go of your attempts to justify your sin. Open your eyes to see the glory of the immortal God. Open your eyes to see God's eternal power and divine nature manifest in creation. And hear the call of the Gospel proclaimed in this great book of Romans, that the Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. I pray that you will believe today.