

# The Wrath of God Revealed

## Romans 1:18-23

In our verse-by-verse study of Paul's letter to the Romans, today we begin the main body of the letter. Verses 1-17 have served as the introduction to this letter whose great theme is the good news, the gospel of God. They have introduced us to Paul, the **messenger** of the Gospel in verse 1. Verses 2-7 introduced us to the **message** of the gospel which is all about God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection. Verses 8-15 introduced us to the **mission** of the gospel, to make disciples of all the nation. And finally verses 16-17 introduced us to the **meaning** of the gospel, that it is the power of God to save by making right with God everyone who believes in Jesus Christ.

Now, having introduced us to his theme the great gospel of Jesus Christ, the first subject Paul discusses in detail is the true condition of mankind -- what he is really like. In the book of Genesis, the first question that God ever asked man was a very revealing one. God came into the garden in the cool of the evening, after Adam and Eve had sinned, and his first question was, "Adam, where are you?"

This is the question that God is always asking man: "Where are you?" Only when we know where we are can we see the way to where we need to be.

Suppose somebody called the church phone Sunday morning, and said that they were trying to find their way here, but were lost. What would be the first question you would ask them?" Well, of course, it would be, "Where are you?"

Until that question is answered, it is impossible to give directions for how to get anywhere. You have to know where you are before someone can help you get to where you ought to be. It doesn't do any good to ask for directions unless you know the answer to that question.

So the first thing that Paul deals with in Romans is the question God asks, "Where are you?"

Spoiler alert: Paul is going to conclude that we are all desperately lost in sin, and deservedly under God's just judgment.

So Paul begins by describing in great detail the sinfulness of the human race. In Romans 1:18-32 Paul describes the sinful condition of the unbelieving world. In Romans 2:1-16 He moves on to indict those who think that they are moral enough to commend themselves to God. Then in Romans 2:17-3:8, Paul turns on the Jews who pride themselves on having the Law, showing how they are also guilty before God. Finally in Romans 3:9-10 he concludes that the entire human race is justly guilty before God:

**What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one;**

Then Paul piles Scripture upon Scripture in Romans 3:11-19 to support his diagnosis of man's sinful condition. Only at that point (3:21-26) does he come back and pick up the gospel theme of 1:17, that the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ is available to sinners through faith alone.

So in this section Paul is showing why God is justified to inflict His wrath on the sinful human race, which shows why we need the gospel.

Follow along as I read Romans 1:18-23,

**18 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.**

We can sum up his message in 1:18-23: God is just in pouring out His wrath on the human race because we have sinfully rejected His revelation of Himself and have worshiped the creature rather than the Creator.

Paul argues that God has revealed Himself to the human race, both through His wrath (1:18) and through His creation (1:19-20). But we have inexcusably rejected God's revelation and instead have resorted to inventing gods of our own (1:21-23).

### **I. The Wrath of God is Revealed (1:18).**

There is an obvious parallel and yet contrast between verses 17 & 18. In verse 17, "the righteousness of God is revealed." In verse 18, "the wrath of God is revealed." The phrase, "from heaven" adds weight to the revelation. This isn't just an idea that popped into Paul's mind. This is a revelation from heaven, that is, from God Himself.

What is the wrath of God? When we think about God's wrath, we need to get rid of any human notions of someone with a bad temper who flies off the handle over the slightest provocation. In fact, the Bible says in more than one place that God is "**slow to anger**" (Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 103:8).

God's wrath is a part of His holy nature. It is His settled, determined, active opposition to all sin. God would not be holy or good if He did not react to evil with anger and righteous judgment.

There are some who think that God only reveals His wrath in the Old Testament. And certainly we see it there: He destroyed the whole world through the flood. He poured out fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah. He punished both Israel and Judah allowing invading armies to kill many and send others into captivity because of their rebellion and idolatry.

What about the New Testament? The New Testament starts off with the ministry of John the Baptist, who tells his audience (Matt. 3:7), "**You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?**" In Matthew 23:33, after pronouncing a series of "woes" on the Pharisees, Jesus thunders, "**You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?**" In John 3:36 we read, "**He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.**"

In Ephesians 2:3, Paul says that all of us were "**children of wrath**," a Jewish way of saying that we were characterized by being under God's wrath. In Ephesians 5:6, he uses a similar expression to say that "**the wrath of God comes on the sons of disobedience.**" In 1 Thessalonians 1:10 he says that Jesus "**rescues us from the**

**wrath to come.**" The entire Book of Revelation shows the many forms of wrath that will be poured out on sinners both before and after Jesus returns.

But the greatest example of God pouring out His wrath was when He put His own Son on the cross to bear our sins, so that He cried out in agony (Matt. 27:46), "**My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?**" Jesus' terrible death shows that God cannot just brush our sin aside. His righteous judgment must be satisfied.

#### **A. Focus of God's wrath: Against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.**

This passage pronounces God's judgment on the whole human race. And it comes in response to man's rejection. First man rebels and then God responds with his wrath.

There is a simple progression here:

Men suppress the truth about God.

That suppression leads to ungodliness.

Ungodliness leads on to unrighteousness, to wickedness.

That wickedness leads to every kind of evil and violence.

Paul is teaching that moral perversion comes from rejection of God. Our first and basic problem is that we disregard and disobey God. This leads to our sins against one another.

#### **B. Cause of God's wrath: Because they suppress the truth in unrighteousness.**

The word "suppress" means to hold down. It implies that men knew the truth, but they want to hold it down so that they can pursue their sins. Whether it is evolution denying God as the Sovereign Creator, or philosophy speculating that we cannot really know God at all, or psychology telling us that we are not responsible for our "problems" (psychologists don't like the word "sin"!)—these are all ways of pushing God away from us so that we can do our own thing. "So that they are without excuse" is probably a purpose clause that means, "Sinners cannot plead ignorance as an excuse"

What is the truth that we suppress? The answer is given in the following verses.

God is true, but we don't want him in our knowledge, so we will suppress this truth. We will exchange it. Distort it. Hide it. Run from it. And finally, become blind to it.

Why do we do this? The key is given in the words, "in unrighteousness." Verse 18b: ". . . who suppress the truth in unrighteousness."

In 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul is describing the end of the age and the great apostasy and deception that will come on the world in those days. He says that the lawless one will come, (verse 10) "with all the deception of unrighteousness (adikia, same word as in Romans 1:18) for those who perish." Please note that unrighteousness deceives; it suppresses the truth. He continues that they are perishing "because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved." Those who are deceived in unrighteousness do not receive the love of the truth. They suppress the truth and evade it. They don't love it. Why? He continues in verses 11-12: "For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but [and this is crucial] took pleasure in unrighteousness."

When you love sin, you cannot love the truth. So here is the great lesson to be learned: the reason the mind evades, twists, distorts, manipulates and suppresses the truth of God is not mainly that we are mentally deficient, but because we are morally deficient. We suppress the Light of God's glory and power because we love the darkness of our

own independence. We love our sins, our self-determination, and therefore we suppress the Truth that God is God and that we are to depend on him and live for his glory.

And this, Paul says in Romans 1:18, is why the wrath of God is being poured out.

## **II. Evidence of the truth of God (1:19-20)**

### **A. Evidence within mankind (1:19)**

Verse 19 affirms that all people have internal, God given evidence of God's existence and nature. "Because the knowledge of God is evident (revealed) in them; for God made it evident (revealed it) to them."

This suppression of the truth is wicked because mankind does not do it in ignorance, for in their hearts and consciences God created the knowledge of Him, who He is, what He is like, what He is about, and how He is about it. Within every person is the witness of and to God so that reasoning beings are bound to acknowledge and worship Him as the only and true God.

### **B. Evidence in creation (1:20)**

Paul goes on to show another way that God has revealed Himself, namely, through His creation. Here Paul is referring to God's general revelation in the created universe, not to His special revelation in His written word. "His invisible attributes" is a summary explained by the next two terms, "His eternal power and Godhead."

This does not mean that we can learn as much about God through nature as we can through His Word. But, even so, men should be able to look at God's creation and conclude many things about His attributes, in addition to His power.

Even in ancient of times, long before the telescope and microscope were invented, the greatness of God was evident both in the vastness and in the tiny intricacies of nature. Men could look at the stars and discover the fixed order of their orbits. They could observe a small seed reproduce itself into a giant tree, exactly like the one from which it came. They could see the marvelous cycles of the seasons, God's created water works of evaporation, cloud formation, distillation, & pool formation. They witnessed the marvel of human birth and the glory of the sunrise and sunset. Even without the special revelation David had, they could see that **"The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork."** (Ps. 19:1).

One brief comment before I move on: in answer to the question that often comes up, "Will God judge the innocent heathen who has never heard about Jesus?" The answer is, there are no innocent heathen. All have sinned against the light that they have received and all will be judged accordingly (Matt. 11:20-24).

## **III. Man's Rejection of God (1:21-23)**

### **A. People did not glorify God or give thanks.**

This is the root sin: Although people know about God, they do not give Him His proper glory and they do not express thanks to Him for His many undeserved blessings. We could easily develop an entire sermon or two here, but let me apply it directly: It's easy to sit here and shake our heads at the heathen, who have no concept of glorifying God or giving thanks. But do I glorify God for His goodness and mercy and grace? Do I give thanks to God for His many blessings that He showers on me every day?

### **B. Their foolish hearts were darkened.**

Paul also refers to this in Ephesians 4:18, where he describes “the Gentiles” (pagans) as “darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart.” When Paul says, “their foolish heart was darkened,” he is referring to their entire inner life, including their intellect, emotions, and will (Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 85). To be in the dark refers to total moral and spiritual blindness. Only God can shine His light into such dark hearts (2 Cor. 4:4-6).

### **C. They profess to be wise, but are fools.**

Since the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Ps. 111:10), those who do not fear God or bow before Him as God profess to be wise, but are fools (Ps. 14:1). “Fools” does not refer to mental deficiency, but to spiritual and moral deficiency. Turning from the revelation that God has given of Himself in His wrath and in creation, sinners plunge into futile speculation. As a philosophy major at a secular university, I know of no better description of godless university professors than Romans 1:21 and 22. The final result is:

### **D. They worship the creature rather than the creator.**

Rejecting God does not lead to atheism, but to substituting the glory of the one true God with manmade idols “in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.” Man didn’t begin with idolatry and polytheism and work his way up to monotheism. Man began by knowing the one true God, but when he suppresses the truth in unrighteousness, he falls into the supreme foolishness of creature worship (Isa. 44:9-20).

Thus God reveals His wrath, His righteous anger and judgment of sin and sinners. here remains time perhaps for one burning question: Is that God's only response to the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men? The answer to that question is No.

Wrath is always mingled with mercy in this age of hope. Look at Romans 2:4-5. Here he speaks to those who are missing this great truth: **"Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? (5) But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God."**

Yes there is kindness in the midst of wrath. God warns with his wrath and he woos with his kindness. God is speaking to you in your pain to warn you, and God is speaking to you in your pleasure to woo you.

s there any hope for us? The hope lies in verses 16-17. "The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith."