

THE WRATH OF GOD REVEALED

Romans 1:18

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As a Christian, have you ever felt that you just didn't quite measure up? You know what is right to do, but you don't do it? Do you ever wonder why God saved you? And if so, why do you have lapses in disobedience? Or, when you have failed, have you ever asked God, "Couldn't you have created a saved but fallen creature that wasn't quite as messed up as me to be a preacher, a mother/grandmother, a father/grandfather, an AWANA leader, an usher, or an elder?"

I begin with these questions because this morning we are going to be dealing with a very difficult subject. I'm concerned that the enemy might try to confuse you or twist what will be said to condemn you right here in this service and cause you to doubt your salvation or worth to God. I want to remind you that Jesus came to save the weak and foolhardy. Jesus knew that when He saved us, we would still fail Him. But, even when we do, He would fulfill His promise to finish the work He has begun in our lives, to transform us so that one day we will be spiritually mature.

Know this, that when Jesus, our all-knowing God, spoke the following words, He knew all those who would follow Him would fail Him. He knew that when they did, the devil, like a wolf, would attack by bringing doubt into their minds. That's why He left us, His weak, defenseless dumb sheep, with these powerful words of promise in **John 10:27-29**:

My sheep hear My voice and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.

Secondly, as we begin this next section in **Romans**, I want you to keep in mind the point we finished with last week: Jesus loves you as you are; but He also loves you so much that He won't let you stay as you are. So when you fail and don't live in a manner you believe is pleasing to the Lord, remember that Jesus sent us a "**helper**," a "**comforter**," His Holy Spirit to teach, correct, and direct our lives, because even though we are saved, we haven't arrived yet. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all on your side, and God will bring you to maturity in His perfect timing. So, relax in His grace and rest in Christ's finished approval that He earned for you on the cross.

This week we begin the next major section of the book of **Romans**. I find it helpful, and think you will too, to see where we have been and where we are headed in the weeks to come as we move through our study of this book. Last week we finished the introduction to **Romans** from the first seventeen verses of the book. In his introduction, the Apostle Paul mentioned the major theme, the Gospel and its power to save and transform the fractured lives of sinners.

With **verse 18**, the next major section of the book begins. Here, Paul reveals why humanity desperately needs the Gospel. In the very first paragraph, **verses 18-23**, Paul addresses a very real problem for all of humanity that only the Gospel can solve. In addition, Paul cites for us the cause of this problem. Further, he will explain that until this problem is resolved, there will be a great divide between God and the individual, as well as between God and the rest of humanity. He will tell us why this problem has been and will continue to be the cause of the self-destruction of every human culture, society, and nation down through history. Furthermore, because humans will not properly address this problem, eventually it will lead to the downfall of this world.

This morning, we will begin looking at the problem--the wrath of God. We begin with trying to understand what it is.

Following this, Paul demonstrates why no human being can be or will ever be justified or declared acceptable by God based on his own efforts, but that all humanity stands condemned before God to eternal damnation. He builds his case in **verse 24-3:8** by describing four classes of people, all of whom stand condemned. He speaks to the hedonist, the self-righteous, the enlightened pagan, and the religionist. Then Paul makes a concluding point in **3:9-20** that all humanity stands condemned before God.

All of this is rather bad news. But one needs a proper assessment of life to know that one is lost before one will appreciate and look for the way out. Is there any good news? Yes, there is! Beginning with **3:21-8:39**, Paul explains the good news of the Gospel, and how it not only can save one from eternal separation from God, but as Paul mentioned in **1:16**, but the **“Gospel is the power of God for salvation,”** or the Gospel contains the power to transform the present life of any who put their trust in Christ.

Up to this point, Paul has talked to us about the act of love that God performed toward all mankind as is revealed through the Gospel; that is, **“The righteousness of God,”** which is code for God’s plan of redemption for human beings. This morning, in **verses 18-23**, Paul will point to another action of God that is revealed toward humanity.

To best understand Paul’s presentation in these next two to three chapters, one must imagine that the Apostle Paul is standing in a courtroom as a prosecuting attorney who is about to present his case before the jury. In this situation, we the readers are the jury. Paul stands up at the table and opens this huge file filled with evidence to prove his case, that humanity stands guilty and condemned before God and should rightfully experience His full wrath.

Although we won’t get through **verse 18** this morning, it would be best for us to read the entire paragraph to better grasp the tone of what’s being said. Please follow along in your Bibles as I read **Romans 1:18-23**.

¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, ¹⁹because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. ²⁰For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood through

what has been made, so that they are without excuse. ²¹For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations and their foolish heart was darkened. ²²Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

As we begin with **verse 18**, it would be honest to say that this second action of God, His revealing His wrath against humanity, is not something many want to hear about, let alone consider as a possibility of being characteristically true about God's nature. One of God's attributes is that He is wrathful.

But notice that in speaking of God's wrath, Paul deliberately uses the same term "**revealed**" in this verse as he did in **verse 17**. As I mentioned last week, this unique verb is a very important term used by Paul in many of his epistles. It is an apocalyptic term that describes the uncovering of a mystery or prophetic plan of God. In **verse 17**, it was the revealing of God's plan of redemption. Here in **verse 18**, it is the revealing of God's plan for destruction. In **verse 17**, the attributes of God that are put on display are His love and righteousness. In **verse 18**, the attributes that are put on display are God's justice and wrath.

As some of you know, I have a real passion for correctly understanding Who God is in His entirety. It is why I have studied in depth the attributes of God. I have found it very interesting in my ministry that when people study the attributes of God, nobody likes to talk or hear about the attribute of God known as His wrath. In fact, you can go to plenty of churches today and you will never hear anybody ever mention the subject of the wrath of God. You will rightfully hear much about God's love, but little if anything about God's wrath. Preachers typically skip over it, ignore it, or pass it by because it is not a fun or pleasant subject to consider.

Some would think that the reason most sermons don't concern the subject of the wrath of God is because it just isn't mentioned that much in the Bible. But the well-respected theologian, Arthur Pink, clearly debunked that idea when he published his study on the attributes of God. He discovered in his research with the help of an exhaustive Bible concordance that mentions how often and where God's wrath is mentioned, that there are more references in Scripture to the anger, fury, and wrath of God than there are to His love and tenderness. (*Attributes of God*, Pink, p.82) That is not to say that God is more wrathful than loving. But what it does demonstrate is that one very true and important attribute of God, one which is equally important to God's love, is the attribute of His wrath. Hence, the subject of the wrath of God should not be ignored or taken lightly. To ignore it will lead to an incomplete and inaccurate picture of who God is.

One of the reasons that we at Crossroads are committed to expository preaching, or the preaching through books, line by line and not skipping over anything, is that it holds us preachers accountable to teach the whole counsel of God. In other words, because this topic of the wrath of God is mentioned often throughout scripture, you won't miss hearing it taught here, because we don't dodge difficult subjects. If it is in the text, we preachers are challenged to do our best to address the subject and to do our best to explain for you.

Also, it is important to keep in mind when one is considering the nature of God that no one attribute is to be given more weight than another. Each attribute of God is equally weighted, equally important to every other attribute. One attribute may be more important to you than another, but as far as God is concerned, they all work equally in concert together.

Take for example, the Apostle Paul's words found in **Romans 11:12**. The context of this verse is Paul's explanation of God's plan for both the Jewish and Gentile peoples of the world. Before this verse, Paul has just reminded his Gentile readers that God had rejected a great mass of their contemporary non-believing Jews for their unbelief and lack of trust in Him. However, at the same time he brought many pagans, like the Roman gentiles, to faith in Christ. Now Paul invites his readers to take note of two aspects of God's character, that He is both kind and severe. Paul writes, "**Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you,**

God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off." The key word here is **"and."** We see that God is both kind and severe. By the way, the Greek word for **"severity"** literally means to be cut off. It is a description of God's wrath. So, three times in this verse, Paul references God's wrath, and three times he references God's kindness. Hence, as believers, we are to contemplate God as both kind and severe, equally together.

Some people think, even gamble with their lives, that God's patience against human rebellion will never expire. Wrong! In **2 Peter 3**, Peter is speaking about God's judgment, the fulfillment of His wrath that will come to the earth. In **verses 9-10**, Peter tells us, **"⁹The Lord is not slow about His promise [to bring judgment] as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."** In other words, God will execute His wrathful judgment, but because He is merciful, He will wait until what He deems the last possible moment to do so, so that more people can be saved. Peter continues, **"¹⁰But the day of the Lord [an expression describing the Day of Judgment] will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up."** When God's patience against sin expires, God cuts people off from His kindness. He no longer makes available to them His love and support. As J.I. Packer concludes, "Behind every display of divine goodness stands a threat of severity in judgment if that goodness is scorned. If we do not let it draw us to God in gratitude and responsive lives, we have only ourselves to blame when God turns against us." (*Knowing God*, Packer, p.148)

To help us more correctly understand God's nature, look at how **Nahum** the prophet describes God. He writes in **1:2**, **"A jealous and avenging God is the Lord; the Lord is avenging and wrathful. The Lord takes vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies."** I want you to note that in your study of the scriptures, you will never see it mentioned that those who have put their trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord will experience God's wrath. Christians may experience some instances of God's discipline in their lives, but His wrath will never be felt by a Christian. Before Christ became your Savior, you were His enemy. But once you trust in Him, you no longer are His enemy. You are now His adopted and beloved child, even when you don't act like it.

In addition, we need to understand that God's discipline and wrath are different. The goal of discipline is meant to educate or instruct. The motivation behind discipline is love. The goal of God's wrath is destruction and is motivated by hate. God's wrath is reserved for His enemies, unbelievers, not we imperfect people who too often fail.

When I speak of God's wrath, I know that I am often speaking to people who have a great misunderstanding for what God's wrath is. Chuck Swindoll describes how some people mistakenly view God. He says that some see God as "some sort of peeved deity, a kind of cosmic, terrible-tempered Mr. Bang, who indulges in violent uncontrolled displays of temper when human beings do not do what they ought to do." (*Living above the Level of Mediocrity*, Swindoll, p.185) Chuck goes on to say that we think this because we think that God must get mad the way people get mad. For instance, we get ticked off when someone does us wrong; and if we even think they did us wrong, we get angry and strike back. But that is not how God responds. People get mad because they are having a bad day. God never has a bad day.

Suppose somebody close to you embezzles money from you or steals something of great value to you, or cheats in an important contest causing you to lose, how do you respond? You get mad. But God owns everything. You can't take anything from Him without His allowing it, because He is sovereign and all powerful, He can take it back any time He wants. He's bigger than you. Hence, God's wrath is not some knee jerk reaction of anger toward a wrong done to Him. God does not throw temper tantrums or pitch hissy fits or have emotional outbursts.

But God does hate sin--little sin, big sin, all sin. God hates sin, because He is holy, and all sin is repulsive to a Holy God. As a result, eventually, He must judge it.

Let me go a step further to convince you that when the Bible describes God as being wrathful, it is not implying that God is some capricious unstable being in need of anger management training. There are two terms for anger that are used in the original language of the New Testament. One is the word from which we get our word thermometer. It is the word "thumos." This word refers to the vehement surge of anger that quickly overcomes people when

they lose control and smack somebody. It is impulsive. It is passionately explosive. It is the kind of anger that suddenly appears like an uncontrollable rage. This is not the word used in our text for God's wrath.

The word used here is the word "orge," which refers to a slow rising indignation. Its original meaning relates to plants, vegetables, and fruits that slowly swell with juice until they finally burst like an overripe tomato. It is more of a settled condition than an explosion. It is a controlled anger. When God becomes wrathful, He has legitimate reason. Hence, God's wrath is a perfectly controlled and settled anger.

At this point, it would probably benefit us if we come up with a definition for God's wrath. I'll borrow this definition from Dr. Tony Evans. He says, "The wrath of God is His necessary, just, and righteous retribution against sin." (*Awesome God*, Evans, p. 234) This response of God toward sin arises out of His very nature. Because God is a God of justice, there must be pre-designed consequences to sin or there wouldn't be any justice. Those consequences come as part of His just judgment.

Let's go back to the prophet **Nahum**, and read further his portrayal of God and his wrath and anger. He writes beginning with **1:3**:

The Lord is slow to anger [no knee-jerk explosions of anger] **and great in power, and the Lord will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. In whirlwind and storm is His way, and clouds are the dust beneath His feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; He dries up all the rivers. Bashan and Carmel wither; the blossoms of Lebanon wither. Mountains quake because of Him, and the hills dissolve; indeed the earth is upheaved by His presence, the world and all the inhabitants in it. Who can stand before His indignation?**

Who can endure the burning of His anger? His wrath is poured out like fire and the rocks are broken up by Him.

So you see, this passage gives us a pretty serious picture of a God who means business and does not take sin or rebellion lightly. However, look at what the next verse, 7, says. **“The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble, and He knows those who take refuge in Him.”** God is good, and those who know Him and trust in Him through Jesus Christ experience His goodness. He is their **“stronghold in the day of trouble.”**

But don't mistake God's goodness for weakness or indifference toward sin. He cannot allow sin to go unaddressed. I mean, how could God be good and just if He looked the other way when faced with evil? We understand that goodness is not just revealed in positive acts, but also in a resistance to that which is wrong or evil. God's wrath or His resistance to that which is wrong is not cruel, but just and good.

Take for instance, sending a guilty person to prison. Prison is not a fun or good or positive place to live; but we lock up people who have committed crimes to keep them from committing those crimes again. We want justice and order in society. That is a good thing. Good imprisonment is a small reflection of God's righteous wrath being just and good.

Here's an additional observation from scripture that concerns God's wrath and explains how God is different than people when we get angry. According to **Ezekiel 33:11**, God takes no pleasure in punishing the unrighteous. We read, **“Say to them, ‘As I live!’ declares the Lord God, ‘I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back; turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?’”** God will punish wrong doing. He has to, but it grieves Him greatly.

The last point I want to cover today is Paul's mention of the cause that leads to God's revealing His wrath. Paul explains, **“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”**

The ultimate reason for God's wrath is the continual suppression of the truth about God and what He has said and done. Suppression of truth is not something that is passive, but deliberate. The term suggests a deliberate, aggressive, and continual holding down of what we instinctively know as true about God and how He has called us to live. We don't have time this morning to fully explain or prove our guilt in doing this, but we will come back to it next time.

All who are without Christ are in the constant process of holding down the truth and are subject to God's anger. This is true in the darkest of jungles as well as in our concrete forests. We deliberately deny the truth, ignore it, water it down, and turn our backs on it. The birth and growth of this **"suppression of truth"** begins with **"ungodliness,"** which moves to **"unrighteousness."** Paul will give the evidence of the birth and growth of the suppression of truth in his "exhibit A" found in **verses 19-23**, and then more evidence in his "exhibit B" in **verses 24-32**, which we will save for later.

But let's finish with Paul's evidence of the birth and growth of the suppression of truth that is wrapped up in the two terms, **"ungodliness"** and **"unrighteousness."**

What is **"ungodliness?"** At the root, ungodliness begins with an attitude that results in an action. To define it, I would say, ungodliness is an attitude of living as though God doesn't exist. It is a total disregard for God. It is what we mean by a secular point of view. It is an attitude that doesn't expect God to be active. In its maturity, it will boldly pronounce that "God is dead!" or that "God never existed!" This ungodliness originates in the heart of a person. It is this attitude that gets God's wrathful juices pumping.

"Unrighteousness," on the other hand, is a selfish action against others and creation that grows out of an attitude of ungodliness. These selfish actions manifest themselves in hurtful acts of men and women toward each other and unnecessary or unwarranted destruction against God's creation.

Notice the order in which Paul mentions these two terms, **"ungodliness"** and **"unrighteousness."** It is purposeful on Paul's part. He is showing us that the first, ungodliness, leads to the second, unrighteousness. The order is never reversed in scripture. It reflects the principle that how we treat others reveals

what kind of vertical relationship we have with God. In contrast to this, as we will see when we get to **chapter 15**, godliness is revealed in true love shown to others.

There is a principle of life that needs to be recognized if we are going to see change take place in our world. It is this: Ungodliness begins in the heart of an individual. If the heart of an ungodly individual is not changed, then the unrighteous acts towards others will not change.

I'm not against rising up and voting for moral laws. But let's get something straight in our thinking. Making new laws prohibiting anything immoral will not stop immorality until the heart is changed. Likewise, producing more educational programs focused on changing people's thinking on ethics or morality will never change mankind's unrighteous behavior, unless the heart is changed. And the only thing that can permanently change the heart of a person is the gospel, for it is the only "**power of God unto salvation.**"

So, just because a secular school starts a morality program that you agree with, I caution you about getting too excited or hopeful about its producing successful, long lasting results. It will produce nothing that will be of eternal significance to that student or teacher until the student or teacher's heart is changed.

Likewise, even if the government reversed the laws on abortion, nothing will change in the realm of moral action in this country until the heart of the country is changed. And the heart of the country can only be changed by the gospel transforming the heart of one person at a time. The historic proof of this is the history of Israel. The nation was birthed with clearly drawn moral, civil, and ceremonial laws that were not complicated or hard to understand. God was very clear in His expression of the Law. But almost overnight, following God's presentation of His Law to Israel, ungodliness expressed itself. Although I definitely vote on moral issues, this is the reason I don't get excited either way when moral legislation passes or fails. What must be changed is the heart of a person. And that is why Jesus came. He came, willingly died, resurrected Himself, and ascended into heaven in order to give us a new heart, a new birth, and a transformed heart that we might live now and forever in a right relationship with God.

If you know Jesus, you have no reason to be afraid of God's wrath. The gospel promises that God has guaranteed that those who have put their trust in Him will escape the wrath of God to come.

And if you know Jesus, thank Him daily for His forgiveness and for His ongoing longsuffering toward you and your faults. Jesus' finished work on the cross gives us this wonderful gift.