

Studies in Romans

The Reason for God’s Wrath (1:18-23)

Keeping in mind Paul’s purpose in writing Romans: “**The purpose of Romans is the glory of God seen in a united missionary church humbled together under grace**” (Christopher Ash).

Context

- **1:1-17 Introduction**
 - 1:1-5 Paul’s greeting and a summary of the gospel
 - 1:6-15 Paul’s relationship with the Romans
 - 1:16-17 Paul’s thesis: God’s gospel is powerful to save all who believe
- **1:18-4:25 The problem and God’s solution**
 - 1:18-3:20 The problem: God’s wrath at our unrighteousness
 - 1:18-32 Mankind is facing God’s wrath, both now and, ultimately, in the future, because we have all rebelled against Him
 - 2:1-3:20 There are no exceptions and no excuses; even the Jews are sinners who face God’s wrath

Last week we examined Paul’s “manifesto” (1:16-17):

So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it 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 for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

- *Why is Paul eager to preach the gospel?*
- *Why isn’t Paul ashamed of the gospel?*
- *Why is the gospel the power of God to rescue?*

Paul has just made the point that the good news about Jesus—the gospel—is the power of God to rescue everyone who believes. God rescues only those who believe, and no one else. This is a staggering claim! Perhaps you’ve been asked (or maybe you have asked it yourself): “What if someone goes through life just trying to be good? What if that person lives a fairly ‘good’ life?” It sounds reasonable. Aren’t we just being narrow – suggesting that God could be displeased with someone who was so *nice*? And what about those who have never heard of Jesus? Isn’t it unfair of God to be angry with them?

Paul has said that God rescues only those who believe. But why can there be no other way? Paul will now set out to prove that assertion.

The Charge

First notice the way **verse 18** is tied to **verse 17**. So what follows is proof of what **verse 17** has just stated.

Question: why is God’s saving righteousness revealed only to those who come to God by faith (v. 17)?

Answer:

What is the wrath of God?

Note that love and anger are not incompatible, either in humans or in God. Rather, it is *indifference* that really demonstrates a lack of love. And we must never equate God’s anger with our own anger.

Note too that we're already starting to see the glimmer of a hint of how God's solution addresses our problem. God is angry at our unrighteousness (v. 18), but his good news concerns a righteousness that comes from Him (v. 17).

God's wrath is "being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men..." God's wrath is being revealed against everything except "the obedience of faith" (v. 5), and God is angry with everyone except those who bow the knee to Jesus.

They "suppress the truth by their unrighteousness"? *How so? What truth are they suppressing and why does that matter? What does that mean?* See v. 19.

So there's a reason for God's wrath. God isn't capricious. He's not unpredictable and fickle. God is right to be angry because:

Our problem is that we do what we know we ought not to do.

Paul has set out the charge in v. 18. Now we need the proof (vv. 19ff "For...").

The charge is proved: what God has done (vv. 19-20)

So what does everybody know (even without a Bible)?

Answer:

Creation is covered in God's fingerprints. God has revealed Himself through the creation. See also **Psalm 19**.

"There is not an atom of the universe in which God's power and divinity are not revealed" (Herman Bavinck).

"Known"?

Grumblers are functional unbelievers! Gratitude is a basic mark of the obedience of faith.

So what can we know about God through creation?

- God is _____
- God is _____

This is a *limited* knowledge of God, but Paul's point is to underline that the knowledge of God that *can* be known in creation is suppressed and distorted by mankind.

Note too that Paul is *not* suggesting that the knowledge of God's existence and power can only come about through careful reasoning and deduction. On the contrary, God's "eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world..." As Thomas Schreiner says, it seems that "God has stitched into the fabric of the human mind his existence and power, so that they are instinctively recognized when one views the created world."

So what does this mean? It means that this *general* revelation of God renders all without excuse.

The charge is proved: what people have done (vv. 21-23)

So what have we done with the revelation that God has given us all in creation?

Note well: “For although they knew God...” There is no such thing as an honest atheist! So again, the problem is not a failure to honour what was known, but a *refusal* to honour what was clearly known.

So according to vv. 21-23, what has been man’s response to the evidence about God that is clearly seen in creation?

Futile in his thinking...

Foolish in his darkened heart...

Exchanging real for counterfeit

For further thought and discussion

- *According to **Romans 1:18-20**, why is it fair that God’s wrath should be revealed?*

- *What is it that lies at the heart of sin?*

- *“Surely God can’t blame people who have never come into contact with the gospel?” How would Paul respond?*

- *When you look at the world God has made, what conclusions do you draw? What conclusions do the makers of “nature programmes” draw? What conclusions do scientists draw? What conclusions ought we to draw?*

- *Examine your own life against the gratitude test of v. 21. What does your level of gratitude say about your heart?*