As Paul begins to unfold the details of the gospel of God in which His righteousness is revealed (see vv. 16-17), he presents an extended discussion of the condemnation of man that extends through chapter 3 and verse 20. He starts with an unequivocal affirmation of God's righteous wrath.

The idea of a wrathful God goes against the wishful thinking of fallen human nature and is even a stumbling block to many Christians. Much contemporary evangelism talks only about abundant life in Christ, the joy and blessings of salvation, and the peace with God that faith in Christ brings. All of those benefits do result from true faith, but they are not the whole picture of God's plan of salvation. The corollary truth of God's judgment against sin and those who participate in it must also be heard.

For Paul, fear of eternal condemnation was the first motivation he offered for coming to Christ, the first pressure he applied to evil men. He was determined that they understand the reality of being under God's wrath before he offered them the way of escape from it. That approach makes both logical and theological sense. A person cannot appreciate the wonder of God's grace until he knows about the perfect demands of God's law and he cannot appreciate the fullness of God's love for him until he knows something about the fierceness of God's anger against his sinful failure to perfectly obey that law. He cannot appreciate God's forgiveness until he knows about the eternal consequences of the sins that require a penalty and need forgiving.

Orgē (wrath) refers to a settled, determined indignation, not to the momentary, emotional, and often uncontrolled anger (thumos) to which human beings are prone.

God's attributes are balanced in divine perfection. If He had no righteous anger and wrath, He would not be God, just as surely as He would not be God without His gracious love. He perfectly hates just as He perfectly loves, perfectly loving righteousness and perfectly hating evil (Ps. 45:7; Heb. 1:9). One of the great tragedies of modern Christianity, including much of evangelicalism, is the failure to preach and teach the wrath of God and the condemnation it brings upon all with unforgiven sin. The truncated, sentimental gospel that is frequently presented today falls far short of the gospel that Jesus and the apostle Paul proclaimed.

Scripture, New Testament as well as Old, consistently emphasizes God's righteous wrath (Ps. 2:5; 12:7; 76:6-7; 78:49-51; 90:7-9). The prophets spoke much of God's wrath (Isa. 9:19; Jer. 7:20; Ezek. 7:19).

In many well-known ways God expressed His wrath against sinful mankind in the Old Testament. In the days of Noah, He destroyed all mankind in the Flood, except for eight people (Gen. 6-7). Several generations after Noah, He confounded men's language and scattered them around the earth for trying to build an idolatrous tower to heaven (Gen. 11:1-9). In the days of Abraham, He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, with only Lot and his family escaping (Gen. 18-19). He destroyed Pharaoh and his army in the sea as they vainly pursued the Israelites to bring them back to Egypt (Ex. 14). He poured out His wrath against pagan kings such as Sennacherib (2 Kings 18-19), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4), and Belshazzar (Dan. 5). He even poured out His wrath against some of His own people—against King Nadab for doing "evil in the sight of the Lord, and [walking] in the way of his father and in his sin which he made Israel sin" (1 Kings 15:25-26) and against Aaron and Miriam, Moses' brother and sister, for questioning Moses' revelations from Him (Num. 12:1-10).
God's wrath is just as clearly exhibited in the New Testament, both in reference to what He has already done and to what He will yet do at the end of the age. The gospel of John, which speaks so eloquently of God's love and graciousness, also speaks powerfully of His anger and wrath. The comforting words "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life," are followed closely by the warning "He who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:16, 36).

Later in his epistle to the Romans, Paul focuses again on God's wrath, declaring, "God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" (Rom. 9:22). The apostle warned the Corinthians that anyone who did not love the Lord Jesus was to be eternally cursed (1 Cor. 16:22). He said to the Ephesians, "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 5:6). He warned the Colossians that because of "immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry ... the wrath of God will come" (Col. 3:5-6). He assured the persecuted Thessalonian believers that God would one day give them relief and that "when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, [He will deal] out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (2 Thess. 1:7-8).

A disease has to be recognized and identified before seeking a cure means anything. In the same way and for the same reason, Scripture reveals the bad news before the good news. God's righteous judgment against sin is proclaimed before His gracious forgiveness of sin is offered. A person has no reason to seek salvation from sin if he does not know he is condemned by it. He has no reason to want spiritual life unless he realizes he is spiritually dead.

In the brief scope of one verse (Rom. 1:18), Paul presents six features that characterize God's wrath: (1) its quality, (2) its time, (3) its source, (4) its extent and (5) nature, and (6) its cause.

The Quality of God's Wrath

Romans 1:18a (NASB)

... of God ...

First, the quality of this wrath is seen in the fact that it is divine, it is of God. It is therefore unlike anything we know of in the present world. God's wrath is not like human anger, which is always tainted by sin. God's wrath is always and completely righteous. He never loses His temper. The Puritan writer Thomas Watson said, "Is God so infinitely holy? Then see how unlike to God sin is.... No wonder, therefore, that God hates sin, being so unlike to him, nay, so contrary to him; it strikes at his holiness."

God's anger is not capricious, irrational rage but is the only response that a holy God could have toward evil. God could not be holy and not be angry at evil. Holiness cannot tolerate unholiness.

Habakkuk 1:13 (NASB)

Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, And You can not look on wickedness with favor...

Jesus twice cleansed the Temple because He was incensed at the money changers and sacrifice sellers who made His "Father's house a house of merchandise" and "a robber's den" (John 2:14-16; Matt. 21:12-13). He was furious that His Father's house was flagrantly dishonored.

Even in the warped and perverted societies of men, indignation against vice and crime is recognized as an essential element of human goodness. We expect people to be outraged by gross injustice and cruelty. The noted Greek
exegete Richard Trench said, "There [can be no] surer and sadder token of an utterly prostrate moral condition than... not being able to be angry with sin—and sinners."1

The Timing of God's Wrath

**Romans 1:18b (NASB)**

… is revealed …

Second, the timing of God's wrath is seen in the fact that it is revealed, a better rendering being "constantly revealed." God's wrath is continually being revealed, perpetually being manifested. *Apokaluptō (revealed)* has the basic meaning of uncovering, bringing to light, or making known.

God's wrath has always been revealed to fallen mankind and is repeatedly illustrated throughout Scripture. It was first revealed in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve trusted the serpent's word above God's. Immediately the sentence of death was passed on them and on all their descendants. Even the earth itself was cursed. As already mentioned, God's wrath was revealed in the Flood, when God drowned the whole human race except for eight souls, in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and in the drowning of Pharaoh's army. It was revealed in the curse of the law upon every transgression and in the institution of the sacrificial system of the Mosaic covenant. Even the imperfect laws that men make to deter and punish wrongdoers reflect and thereby help to reveal the perfect and righteous wrath of God.

By far, the surpassing revelation of God's wrath was that placed upon His own Son on the cross, when Jesus took to Himself the sin of the world and bore the full divine force of God's fury as its penalty. God hates sin so deeply and requires its penalty so that He allowed His perfect, beloved Son to be put to death as the only means by which fallen mankind might be redeemed from sin's curse.

The historian J. A. Froude wrote, "One lesson, and only one, history may be said to repeat with distinctness; that the world is built somehow on moral foundations; that, in the long run, it is well with the good; in the long run, it is ill with the wicked."2

We wonder, then, why so many wicked people prosper, seemingly doing evil with utter impunity. But if God's wrath is delayed, His bowl of wrath is all the while filling up, increasing judgment for increased sin. They are only storing up wrath for the coming day of wrath (Rom. 2:5).

**Romans 2:5 (NLT)**

But because you are stubborn and refuse to turn from your sin, you are storing up terrible punishment for yourself. For a day of anger is coming, when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.

Donald Grey Barnhouse recounts the story of a group of godly farmers in a Midwest community being irritated one Sunday morning by a neighbor's plowing his field across from their church. Noise from his tractor interrupted the worship service, and, as it turned out, the man had purposely chosen to plow that particular field on Sunday morning in order to make a point. He wrote a letter to the editor of the local paper, asserting that, although he did not respect the Lord or honor the Lord's Day, he had the highest yield per acre of any farm in the county. He asked the editor how Christians could explain that. With considerable insight and wisdom, the editor printed the letter and followed it with the simple comment, "God does not settle [all] His accounts in the month of October."3

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2 *Short Studies on Great Subjects*, vol. 1, "The Science of History" [London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915], p. 21
The Source of God's Wrath

Romans 1:18c (NASB)
… from heaven …

God's wrath is rendered from heaven. Despite Satan's present power as prince of the air and of this world, the earth is ultimately dominated by heaven, the throne of God, from which His wrath is constantly and dynamically manifested in the world of men.

Heaven reveals God's wrath in two ways, through His moral order and through His personal intervention. When God made the world, He built in certain moral as well as physical laws that have since governed its operation. Just as a person falls to the ground when he jumps from a high building, so does he fall into God's judgment when he deviates from God's moral law. That is built-in wrath. When a person sins, there is a built-in consequence that inexorably works. In this sense God is not specifically intervening, but is letting the law of moral cause and effect work.

The second way in which God reveals His wrath is through His direct and personal intervention. He is not an impersonal cosmic force that set the universe in motion to run its own course. God's wrath is executed exactly according to His divine will.

Several Hebrew words which convey a highly personal character are used in the Old Testament to describe God's anger. ḥārasē is used ninety-one times. It refers to becoming heated, to burning with fury, and is frequently used of God. This wrath of God is spoken of in Genesis 18:30 in reference to His response to the "exceedingly grave" sin of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:20). ḥārōn is used forty-one times. It refers exclusively to divine anger and means "a burning, fierce wrath" (see, e.g., Ex. 15:7). Qâtsaph, which means bitter, is used thirty-four times, most of which refer to God (see, e.g., Deut. 1:34). The fourth term for wrath, ḥēmāh, which also refers to a venom or poison, is frequently associated with jealousy and is used most often of God (see, e.g., 2 Kings 22:13). David declared that "God is a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation every day" (Ps. 7:11). "Indignation" translates ṣâʾam, which means to foam at the mouth, and is used over twenty times in the Old Testament, often of God's wrath.

Whether the cause and effect wrath or the personal fury of God is meted out, the wrath originates in heaven.

The Extent and Nature of God's Wrath

Romans 1:18 (NASB)
… against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men …

The fourth and fifth features of God's wrath concern its extent and its nature.

God's wrath is universal, being discharged against all who deserve it. No amount of goodwill, giving to the poor, helpfulness to others, or even service to God can exclude a person from the all Paul mentions here. As he later explains more explicitly, "both Jews and Greeks are all under sin,... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:9, 23). Obviously, some people are morally better than others, but even the most moral and upright person falls far short of God's standard of perfect righteousness. No one escapes.

Men's relative goodness compared to God's perfect standard can be illustrated by a hypothetical attempt to jump from the beach near Los Angeles to Catalina Island, a distance of some twenty-six miles. Some people could not manage to jump at all, many could jump a few feet, and a rare few could jump twenty or twenty-five feet. The longest conceivable jump, however, would cover only the smallest fraction of the distance required. The most moral
The person has as little chance of achieving God’s righteousness in his own power as the best athlete has of making that jump to Catalina. Everybody falls short.

The second emphasis of this phrase is on the nature of God’s wrath. It is not like the wrath of a madman who strikes out indiscriminately, not caring who is injured or killed. Nor is it like the sin-tainted anger of a person who seeks to avenge a wrong done to him. God’s wrath is reserved for and justly directed at sin. *Asebía (ungodliness)* and *adikia (unrighteousness)* are synonyms, the first stressing a faulty personal relationship to God. God is angered because sinful men are His enemies (see Rom. 5:10) and therefore “children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3).

**Ungodliness** refers to lack of reverence for, devotion to, and worship of the true God, a failure that inevitably leads to some form of false worship. Although the details and circumstances are not revealed, Jude reports that Enoch, the righteous seventh-generation descendant of Adam, prophesied about God’s coming “to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him” (Jude 14-15). Four times he uses the term ungodly to describe the focus of God’s wrath upon sinful mankind.

**Unrighteousness** encompasses the idea of ungodliness but focuses on its result. Sin first attacks God’s majesty and then His law. Men do not act righteously because they are not rightly related to God, who is the only measure and source of righteousness. **Ungodliness** unavoidably leads to **unrighteousness**. Because men’s relation to God is wrong, their relation to their fellow men is wrong. Men treat other men the way they do because they treat God the way they do. Man’s enmity with his fellow man originates with his being at enmity with God.

**Sin** is the only thing God hates. He does not hate poor people or rich people, dumb people or smart people, untalented people or highly skilled people. He only hates the sin that those people, and all others, naturally practice, and sin inevitably brings His wrath.

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**The Cause of God’s Wrath**

**Romans 1:18 (NASB)**

… who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

"But how is it," we ask, "that God can hold everyone responsible for moral and spiritual failure, and be so angry when some people have so much less opportunity than others for hearing the gospel and coming to know God?" The answer is that, because of man’s sinful disposition, every person is naturally inclined to follow sin and resist God. This phrase could be rendered, "who are constantly attempting to suppress the truth by steadfastly holding to their sin."

**Unrighteousness** is so much a part of man’s nature that every person has a built-in, natural, compelling desire to suppress and oppose God’s truth.

As Paul declares in the following verse, "That which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them" (v 19). His point is that all people, regardless of their relative opportunities to know God’s Word and hear His gospel, have internal, God-given evidence of His existence and nature, but are universally inclined to resist and assault that evidence. No matter how little spiritual light he may have, God guarantees that any person who sincerely seeks Him will find Him. "You will seek me and find Me," He promises, "when you search for Me with all your heart" (Jer. 29:13).

But men are not naturally inclined to seek God. That truth was proved conclusively in the earthly ministry of Christ. Even when face-to-face with God incarnate, the Light of the world,
John 3:19-20 (NASB)
19 "This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. 20 "For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

John 3:19-20 (AMP)
19 The [basis of the] judgment (indictment, the test by which men are judged, the ground for the sentence) lies in this: the Light has come into the world, and people have loved the darkness rather than and more than the Light, for their works (deeds) were evil. 20 For every wrongdoer hates (loathes, detests) the Light, and will not come out into the Light but shrinks from it, lest his works (his deeds, his activities, his conduct) be exposed and reproved.

As David had proclaimed hundreds of years earlier, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; there is no one who does good" (Ps. 14:1).

Psalm 14:1 (NASB)
The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; There is no one who does good.

Sinful men oppose the idea of a holy God because they innately realize that such a God would hold them accountable for the sins they love and do not want to relinquish.

Every person, no matter how isolated from God's written Word or the clear proclamation of His gospel, has enough divine truth evident both within and around him (Rom. 1:19-20) to enable him to know and be reconciled to God if his desire is genuine.

Romans 1:19-20 (NASB)
19 because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20 For 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.

Romans 1:19-20 (NLT)
19 They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them. 20 For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.

It is because men refuse to respond to that evidence that they are under God's wrath and condemnation. "This is the judgment," Jesus said, "that... men loved the darkness rather than the light" (John 3:19). Thus God is angry with the wicked every day (Psa. 7:11).4

Psalm 7:11 (NLT)
God is an honest judge. He is angry with the wicked every day.

Questions

1. Describe the key qualities of the wrath of God. Cite Scripture to support your answer.

2. Describe how God's wrath (anger) is different from that of mankind. Cite Scripture to support your answer

4 MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Romans 1-8