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Romans 1:18-20      “Is Our God a God of Wrath?”

Intro. In preaching through the book of Romans, we are up to this text which declares the wrath of God. Some would prefer that I not preach on this subject, but if one sets out to be an expositor of the Word of God, it is necessary to consider *all* of the revelation of the truth of God. My task as a preacher is not to preach what is popular with men, but what is pleasing to God. And so preaching both the pleasant and the unpleasant truths is my responsibility under God. Paul told the elders of the Ephesian church, “for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). So I am going to preach a message that some preachers will not preach, but I *will* preach it for I must be faithful to fulfill my calling from God.

What if a young man applied for a job with Western Union, and promptly got the job. But he warned his employer that he cannot stand to see anyone unhappy. So he told his boss that he would only deliver good messages. He would refuse to deliver telegrams which contained messages of sickness, death, or loss. As you might imagine, that young man would not keep the job. Any Western Union messenger must be willing to deliver *all* of the messages he receives.

You see, there is tremendous value in not only preaching the good news but also the bad news of the Word of God. For only when people truly believe the bad news about the consequences of their sinful condition, they will seek mercy and forgiveness from the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. It’s similar to what happens every day in doctor’s offices. If a person has a deadly disease like cancer, the doctor must first convince the patient that he has cancer, and that cancer kills. Otherwise, he will never be willing to accept the remedy of surgery and/or cancer treatments, which can be costly and painful.

V.18 begins the first main section of the book of Romans, which deals with the guilt of mankind and the wrath of God. You may be surprised that Paul begins his presentation of the gospel in this way. However, it is all part of an effective strategy. It’s as if Paul brings the whole world into court to set forth the case of the prosecution and *accuses every* person of being guilty before God. In chapter 1 he shows that the pagan, idol-worshipping Gentile is under the wrath of God. In chapter 2 he shows that even the Jew is guilty, and under the wrath of God. In chapter 3 he shows the universal corruption and condemnation upon man. So the religious person is guilty and the irreligious person is guilty. The heathen in the jungle is guilty and without excuse, and the cultured person in the big city is guilty as well. He proves that because of sin and unbelief, we are unable to claim a favorable verdict at the judgment bar of God. By presenting the bad news regarding our sin and God’s wrath, he is setting the stage for the gospel in chapters 3-5. Man’s condemnation ought to lead him to the Great Deliverer. The wrath of God ought to drive him to the love of God.

So notice with me that Paul begins his case by affirming:

## I. THE REALITY OF THE WRATH OF GOD

Paul says in v.18, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven....” For now, I want to focus on the phrase “wrath of God.” The Bible clearly teaches that our God is a God of love (1 John 4:8, 16). And so some people are disturbed about the idea of a God of love possessing

wrath. They see those attributes as being in conflict. But God's attributes are balanced. God is perfect in His love, but He is also perfect in His holiness and His justice. God says in Isa. 13:11, "I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity...." (Cf. Ps. 7:11). God has great love for the sinner, but the righteousness and holiness of God react with wrath against sin.

Could we respect any God who did not hate sin? Heb. 1:9 says of Jesus, "You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness." Indeed, love includes wrath toward any sin that harms those we love.

Suppose someone commits the sin of drunkenness, and then they foolishly think that they can drive home. Because of the influence of alcohol, they have lost sound judgment. Suppose on their way home they veer into the other lane and crash head-on into the car that my wife was driving and she sustained serious injuries. Don't you think I would experience wrath toward that drunk driver? Even so, sin destroys human life and brings great suffering. That is why Paul said in Romans 12:9, "Abhor what is evil." So if God loves us, then He must allow His wrath to burn against sin. Someday by means of His wrath He will purify the whole universe from every vestige of sin, and never again will sin bring so much havoc and sorrow. When that comes to pass, we will be very thankful for the wrath of God.

What does the Bible mean when it talks about the wrath of God? There are two different words in the Greek New Testament that are translated with the English word "wrath." One word, *thumos*, refers to the hot, vehement surge of anger that is seen when we lose our temper. The root meaning of the word is "to breathe violently." When someone gets very angry, they usually begin to breathe heavily, turn red, and their hair stands up on their neck. Most of the time this word is used of the wrath of man, rather than the wrath of God.<sup>1</sup> The other word, found here in v.18 is the word *orge*, which refers to an indignation that is more settled, and slow in reaching the boiling point of anger. This is the more common word used of the wrath of God (used 36 times). In fact, since the word "God" does not have the definite article, it can be translated "divine wrath." God's wrath is different from human wrath. God is not a person in a bad mood, ready to lash out with wrath at anyone who crosses Him. His wrath is not capricious, irrational and egotistical, as it was with the Greek and Roman gods. His wrath is much more settled, rooted in His holiness and unchanging standards of righteousness. He is not going to blow up in anger every time you sin against Him. In fact, the Bible declares that He is slow to anger. But as mankind continues to sin, and continues to reject Him and His truth, you can be sure that His wrath is building to the point that someday, it will burst forth against this ungodly world.

The wrath of God is like the great waters held back behind a dam during a heavy rain. If they don't open the flood gates, the pressure could build to the point that all the waters break forth at once from the dam, creating destruction for everything in its path. Even so, the storehouse of God's wrath grows greater and greater, held back by the longsuffering patience of God. But some day the wrath of God will be restrained no longer, and this world will experience the wrath of God, as clearly described in Romans 2:5, "But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed."

A person can even shake their fist at God and curse God, but God is longsuffering toward us. But don't mistake the patience of God to be a sign that there is no such thing as the wrath of God. Some think that because God does not immediately blast every sin, they are getting away with

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<sup>1</sup> Rom. 2:8; Rev. 14:10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19; 19:15 use it of the wrath of God (8/18 occurrences). In these cases, it is either used in conjunction with *orge*, or it is used of the actual outpouring of God's wrath, which at this point is properly described as *thumos*.

something. And if you think that, then you just do not understand the true nature of the wrath of God. He will usually hold back His wrath to give us more time to repent, as stated in 2 Peter 3:9.

So don't think that God will not eventually hold you accountable for your sin. I challenge you to believe in the reality of the wrath of God. It is a reality you must reckon with, and not ignore. And if you have any doubts about the reality of the wrath of God, then I want you to consider with me not only the reality of the wrath of God, but also how that reality is proven by:

## II. THE REVELATION OF WRATH OF GOD

Has God revealed the truth that he is a God of wrath against sin? Indeed He has. Paul says in v.18, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven..." "Is revealed" is a present tense. Paul declares that there is an ongoing revelation of the wrath of God. Or we could say that there is a dynamic, active expression of divine displeasure that can be observed and discerned. If you believe that the one true God is not a God of wrath, then you are going against what God has clearly revealed about Himself in nature and in Scripture. Don't try to plead ignorance regarding the reality of God or His wrath. Don't say on Judgment Day, "God, I didn't know about your wrath against sin," for as Paul says, "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven..." No claim of ignorance will serve as an excuse. God is perfectly just when He does pour out His wrath.

Now there are a number of ways that God has revealed and is revealing this truth:

A. In Nature - We can see the curse of sin and wrath of God against sin revealed in nature. In fact, if all we had to go on was nature, we would more easily believe in the wrath of God rather than the love of God. His love can be seen in His provision of food, and the many pleasures the natural world brings to us, including the beauties of nature, such as flowers. In fact, Paul said in Acts 14:17, "Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." But we see His wrath manifested in earthquakes and violent storms, such as the recent tornadoes in the Midwest that took about 100 lives and destroyed much property. Then, what about the multitudes of diseases that bring suffering and death? Some diseases are more directly related to sinful behaviors, such as AIDS, venereal diseases, and diseases related to drug and alcohol abuse. Even right here in our context we see the wrath of God at work. Sin tends to spiral out of control, and one way God judges sin is to give us over to the bondage of even more sin, and worse forms of sin, as he says in vv.24-31.

Many ask, "Why is there so much suffering in the world?" The biblical answer is that sin brings a curse upon us, including suffering and death. Can't you see from all the pain and suffering of this world that mankind is sinful and under the wrath of God? Indeed, God has built into the spiritual world moral laws of consequence. As Paul said in Galatians 6:7-8, "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption..."

I believe we can also see evidence of the revelation of the wrath of God in the evidences for a great flood (Genesis 6:5-17), the stories of which were well-known in the ancient world.<sup>2</sup> Sedimentary rock and fossils do not form apart from flood waters. We see sedimentary rock all over the world. That confirms the biblical story of a great flood, which resulted from the fact that

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<sup>2</sup> There are over 200 myths from all over the world about a major Flood, the earliest that survived dating back to 1800 BC (arkencounter.com).

the pre-flood world became exceedingly sinful, and eventually the wrath of God broke forth with a great, destructive flood.

We also see that the wrath of God has been clearly revealed:

B. In the Word of God - The wrath of God is clearly revealed in the Old Testament. I could give numerous examples. But it is also revealed in the New Testament as well. Acts 17:31 says, "because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." The book of Revelation has quite a bit to say about the wrath of God that is awaiting those who have sinned and rejected Christ (11:18; 14:10, 19; 16:1-21; 19:15). God's wrath will be poured out upon this world around the time of the Second Coming of Christ (1 Thess. 1:10). I believe that day is drawing near.

We also see one of the greatest revelations of the wrath of God:

C. In the Cross of Christ - In the cross we see a marvelous display of the love of God. But we also see a clear revelation of the wrath of God against sin. Should I remind you of the suffering of Christ on our behalf? He experienced God's wrath in our place. He endured the mockings, the beatings, and the scourging. Then, when He was laid upon that altar of wood, He was nailed to that cross and lifted between heaven and earth. He suffered excruciating pain upon that cross for hours. In addition to all the physical suffering, God laid upon Him the sin of us all, and endured God's wrath. When Christ was made sin for us, He became a curse, for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" (Gal. 3:13). In that dark hour the storm of God's wrath reached its peak as the sun grew dark and night fell upon the earth at noon, and the raging waves of God's wrath flooded upon the Lord Jesus for three hours.

Will you see what the cross of Christ is saying about you? It is declaring that you have sinned and you deserve the same wrath of God that was displayed at the cross. But Jesus took your place. If you do not believe in Jesus, then *you* must receive the wrath of God against sin in your own life.

So the evidence of the wrath of God is very clear. Anyone's unbelief about that reality does not change the truth of the wrath of God. So we need to take that evidence very seriously, and flee from the wrath to come, as the great preacher John the Baptist said in Matthew 3:7. Only Christ offers the opportunity to escape God's wrath, for as I said, He took upon Himself the wrath all men deserve.

Finally, we also see from our text:

### III. THE REASONS FOR THE WRATH OF GOD

There are those who would question why it would be fair and just for God to pour out His wrath. Many believe they and others should be excused from being recipients of the wrath of God. They say they live pretty good lives and do good deeds. Many would excuse the one living in a remote jungle, who has never heard the gospel or the written Word of God. So Paul gives two reasons why God's wrath is just and right, even upon those who have not received Scriptural revelation. One reason for God's wrath is:

A. Because of Sin – In the last of v.18 Paul explains why there is just cause for God's wrath against men. God's wrath burns against "all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men..." So first of all, Paul says "ungodliness" bring on the wrath of God. Ungodliness is a general word for sin

against God, but it especially refers to impiety toward God, a lack of reverence toward the true God. Boy, do we see that in modern American culture! Many people speak God's name in vain, even accompanied by a curse word. They see no need to worship God with others. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of Americans who have completely abandoned the practice of weekly worship. They are ungodly. This very sin is cited as a cause of God's judgment in Jude 1:15.<sup>3</sup>

Ungodliness leads to the other problem mentioned here, and that is "unrighteousness." This may primarily refer to sin and injustice against our fellow man, though it includes sin against God. For example, when we spread gossip and lies, we are not treating people right. When we steal or defraud people, we are being unrighteous. Paul gives more examples of unrighteousness toward our fellow man in vv.29-31. Because of such sins, we are also not right with God. And Paul says in Colossians 3:6, "Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience."

I ask you this morning, are you truly godly and reverent toward God? Are you unrighteous in your dealings with your fellow man? Paul will show in Romans 3:10 & 23 that all have sinned and are guilty before God. None can measure up to the righteousness that God requires.

Furthermore, God's wrath is merited:

B. Because of What People Do with the Truth of God – In the last of v.18 Paul points out that God's wrath is against people "who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." The literal meaning of the word is "hold down." There are even many preachers who suppress the truth of the wrath of God as well as other truths about God. Unbelievers know, or at least have access to the truth about God and His wrath against sin, but because they want to continue in their sin, they suppress or restrain<sup>4</sup> the truth about God. They close their minds to it (cf. John 3:19). So their lives are not affected by the truth. Deep down they know that there is one true God, who is righteous and holy. People have a conscience and they know that they are accountable to a God who judges sin, but they suppress the truth, for they do not want to submit their wills to God's will. And the present tense indicates that people are pretty persistent in suppressing the truth about God. I would also point out that truth and unrighteousness are moral opposites. Error about God and ourselves leads to immoral lives (cf. 2 Cor. 10:4-5).

We sure have seen this in the last two years as giant tech companies have deplatformed or covered up the posts and videos of those who go against the prevailing views regarding gender and sexuality. Knowing the tendency of those in power to suppress the truth, our founding fathers put into the bill of rights the right to free speech! Then, just watch what happens if someone suggests that the evidence for divine creation should be taught in the public school science classroom, including the kind of evidence cited in v.20 of our text! Some even go so far as to deny that God even exists. Many others live *as though* God did not exist. If you're living like there's no God, you'd better be right! As someone said, "Eternity is too long to be wrong."

Some may argue that many people do not have this truth about God, especially the heathen in some faraway place. But Paul says in v.19 that all people do have this knowledge of the truth about God, "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them." On Judgment Day no one can claim that they were ignorant of God, and ignorant of their responsibility to seek Him, worship Him, and obey Him.

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<sup>3</sup> "to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him" (Jude 1:15).

<sup>4</sup> This is how the word is translated in 2 Th. 2:6-7.

Next, he explains in v.20 what everyone can know about God, “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. So they are without excuse.” The phrase “His invisible attributes” refers to the fact that God is invisible, and we cannot see Him; nor can we see what He is like by looking at Him. John 1:18 says, “No one has seen God at any time.” But God has never left Himself without a witness. He has revealed Himself through His creation. For example, Psa. 19:1 says, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.”

So Paul says there are two things that everyone in the world can know about God from creation, including the savage in the jungles of the Amazon. So what are the two things? It is His eternal power and Godhead. I believe Paul’s focus is on His eternal power, which proves His Deity. So great an effect as creation must have an even greater cause. God has left the imprints of His glorious power upon His handiwork. For example, think of the power of the sun! It provides enough heat to warm this planet though it is millions of miles away. We cannot even comprehend how much consuming power the sun has.<sup>5</sup> Then go out some night and see the stars. We now know that most stars are much larger than our sun. Imagine all the power of all those stars combined! And just think, the stars that we can see with the naked eye make up just a fraction of all the stars in our galaxy! In fact, it is believed by astronomers that the Milky Way galaxy is just one of over 100 billion other galaxies! The combined power of all those stars is more than the human mind can even comprehend. So great an effect must have a greater cause, so there must be a God of omnipotent power. Now when you combine the truth of the omnipotent power of God with the truth of the wrath of God, that ought to instill the fear of God in your soul!

Another invisible attribute of God that is manifest in creation is the wisdom and supreme intelligence of God. Jer. 51:15 says, “It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.” The mathematical accuracy of the movements of the heavenly bodies bears witness to a highly intelligent Creator. The design and function of the human body is absolutely amazing. The revelations of modern science leave us with even less of an excuse not to believe in God and worship Him. The DNA code is an amazing example of divine programming. How could that develop through random combinations of atoms and molecules? And do you realize that the human brain contains about 11 billion nerve cells, or neurons? And each neuron is an impressive microprocessor in its own right. The brain is not just similar to a computer with billions of on/off switches; it is more like a *network* of billions of computers, all capable of being individually programmed, and reprogrammed in response to various situations.<sup>6</sup>

Long ago an Indian chief was discussing his Christian faith when a reporter challenged him, “How can you say you know there is a God?” The Native American leader pointed to the ground, “For the same reason I know a bear and not a man passed by here last night. ... God has also left a trail for me to follow.”<sup>7</sup>

Now because of such overwhelming evidence from creation, Paul declares in the last of v.20 that anyone who rejects this truth of God is “without excuse.” In fact, one of the purposes of creation is to reveal the glory of God, and to leave us without excuse if we reject God and fail to worship Him. And so, when the wrath of God is poured out upon them on Judgment Day, they will

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<sup>5</sup> It puts out 382,800,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 watts of energy.

<sup>6</sup> Francis Mark Mondimore, *Bipolar Disorder*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Baltimore: John’s Hopkins Univ. Press, 2006), 78.

<sup>7</sup> John Gilimartin, *Sermon Illustrations Each Week*.

not be able to offer up any excuses. The heathen are condemned because they have failed to live up to the light they *do* have. So God's judgment will be completely just.

Have you ever experienced the wrath of your mom or dad or your spouse or your boss? You try to avoid provoking their wrath, don't you? How much more should you want to be careful not to provoke the wrath of God who is more powerful than you can imagine. You should want to make sure that you have a right standing with Him! I don't want His wrath against me, yet deep down inside I know that I have sinned, and God's wrath is the appropriate response of a holy God against sin. So I and others know that we need to do something to get right with God. But the great tragedy is that man, seeing the evidence of God in the telescope or microscope still refuses to submit to God. He suppresses or at least ignores the evidence so he can live his life as he pleases. Such people will certainly experience the wrath of God someday unless they repent.

Conclusion: Now what is Paul's purpose in bringing up the truth of the wrath of God? Why does he demonstrate that we all are condemned and without excuse? He is seeking to lead us to the conclusion that our only hope of salvation and forgiveness is in Jesus Christ, who took God's wrath in our place.

Have you been suppressing the voice of conscience? Have you tended to avoid worshipping God, and hearing God's Word? If so, it is time to accept God's verdict about your sin and the wrath that you deserve. It is time to turn from sin, and turn to Christ, who died for you on the cross. Don't live another day in danger of the wrath of God, which He has clearly revealed from heaven.

For years Madalyn Murray O'Hair was the most well-known atheist in America. She led the courts to ban prayer and Bible reading from our public schools. She debated many Christians on TV, denying the truth of God. In 1995 she, one of her sons, and a granddaughter disappeared, along with \$500,000 in gold coins. Years later, their remains were finally unearthed, confirming a violent end.<sup>8</sup> You can deny God, and suppress the truth of God all you want, but that does not remove the reality of God, His power, or His wrath. Indeed, the wrath of God *is* revealed. Don't deny it. Turn to the Savior, who alone can make you right with God. John 3:36 says, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."

Most of us here today have already believed in Christ. How do *we* apply this message? Well Paul said in 2 Cor. 5:11, "Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men..." The truth of the wrath of God ought to motivate us to share the Gospel. It ought to move to send missionaries to those in faraway lands. It should motivate us to pray for the lost. Do you have a child, a brother or sister, a parent, or some other family member or friend who is in danger of the wrath of God? Then keep praying for their salvation until you see them turn to Christ. Share the gospel with them. May the truth of the wrath of God give us a burden for souls, and may we point them to the love of God as manifested in the cross of Christ!

Sources: Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2022; H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on Romans* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1928); John MacArthur, Jr., *The Wrath of God: Study Notes on Romans 1:16-23* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1982); Leon McBeth, *Exegetical & Practical Commentary on Romans* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1937); Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); John

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<sup>8</sup> J. Kenneth Bassett, *Timeless Signatures*. 2003, [www.timelessignatures.org](http://www.timelessignatures.org).

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