

Romans: The Good News of God

The Wrath of God

Romans 1:18

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The Wrath of God

Scripture

Today, we continue our study of Paul's letter to the Romans at Romans 1:18. Romans 1:1-17 is essentially an introduction to Paul's letter to the Romans, whereas Romans 1:18 begins the "body" of the letter.

Several years ago I listened to an interview on the radio. I believe the man being interviewed was a TV news anchor in Louisville, KY. He said that he had been a jogger since 1980. In 1998 he noticed that he did not feel right after some of his jogs. After the feeling persisted for several weeks he went to see a doctor. Over a period of many months he had \$10,000 worth of tests. Finally, it was discovered that he had intestinal cancer. The doctors operated on him and he eventually recovered from his cancer.

For a long time that man did not know that he had cancer. Initially, he did not feel right after his jogging. As he began to feel increasingly worse, more and more tests were done to determine the nature of his discomfort. It was only after many months and many tests that his discomfort was accurately diagnosed as intestinal cancer. Only then could the appropriate treatment be applied in order to heal him of his cancer.

In the same way and for the same reason, Scripture accurately diagnoses our root problem before applying the right cure. Scripture reveals the bad news before giving us the good news. God's righteous judgment against sin is proclaimed before his gracious provision of salvation is offered. Romans 1:18 reveals to us the root of our problem: God's wrath because of our sin. Romans 1:18 says:

¹⁸ **The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, (Romans 1:18)**

Introduction

As Paul begins to unfold the details of the gospel of God in which his righteousness is revealed (1:16-17), he presents an extended discussion of the condemnation of man that begins here in Romans 1:18 and extends through Romans 3:20. Paul starts with an explicit affirmation of God's righteous **wrath**.

The idea of a God of **wrath** goes against the grain of fallen human nature and is even a stumbling block to many Christians. When I was an Associate Pastor in my first church, I was responsible for the evangelism training in our church. Whenever I had the opportunity to share the gospel, I would often ask my non-Christian friend what he thought God was like. Almost always, the answer would be something like, "I think of God as a God of love." I don't believe anyone ever said to me that he thought of God as a God of **wrath**, or anger, or even justice.

Now, it is absolutely true that God is a God of love. But that is only one of his many attributes. Why is it that so many of us think of God primarily as a God of love but have much greater difficulty thinking of him as a God of **wrath**?

Well, I am not sure I know all the reasons, but it seems to me that we do not have a clear enough understanding of the awful depth of our sin and also of the perfection of God's absolute holiness.

All of God's attributes are balanced in divine perfection. God loves righteousness just as much and just as perfectly as he hates wickedness, as the Psalmist says of God in Psalm 45:7a, "You love righteousness and hate wickedness."

We will never properly appreciate the fullness of God's love for us until we know something of the fierceness of God's wrath against us. God is righteously angry against us because we have broken his perfect and holy law. Until we recognize that we have broken his law and that God is rightly angry against us, we will not cry out to him for mercy and experience his wonderful grace.

Before we can ever experience God's grace and mercy and love, we must recognize and own that we have fallen deeply into sin. We must affirm that we have broken his law. We must acknowledge that we have rebelled against him. And for all of our law-breaking and rebellion, God is rightly and righteously angry.

Many Christians mistakenly think that God is revealed as a God of **wrath** in the Old Testament and then as the God of love in the New Testament. That is an entirely mistaken understanding. Just as the love of God is revealed throughout the entire Scriptures (both Old and New Testaments), so also is the **wrath** of God revealed throughout the entire Scriptures (both Old and New Testaments). The **wrath** of God stated or described in the following passages: Genesis 6-7; 11:1-9; 18-19; Exodus 14; 2 Kings 18-19; Psalm 2:5, 12; 76:6-7; 78:49-51; 90:7-9; Isaiah 9:19; Jeremiah 7:20; Ezekiel 7:19; Daniel 4; John 3:36; Romans 9:22; 1 Corinthians 16:22; Ephesians 5:6; Colossians 3:5-6; and 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8.

Lesson

In the brief scope of one verse, Romans 1:18, Paul presents several features that characterize God's **wrath**.

I. The Quality of God's Wrath (1:18a)

First, the quality of God's **wrath** is seen in the fact that it is divine, it is **of God**.

It is therefore unlike anything we know of in our world. Biblically, the **wrath** (**οργη**) **of God** refers to a settled, determined indignation and displeasure, and not to the momentary, emotional, and often uncontrolled anger (**θυμος**) to which we human beings are prone. **The wrath of God** is not like human anger, which is always tainted by sin. **The wrath of God** is always completely righteous. God 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 him, nay, so contrary to him; it strikes at his holiness.”

The wrath of God is not capricious, irrational rage but is the only response that a holy God can have toward evil. God cannot be holy and not be angry at evil. Holiness cannot tolerate unholiness, as the prophet Habakkuk said, “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong” (1:13).

Even in our fallen human societies, 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

Friends, God is perfectly angry with sin and sinners all the time with a holy **wrath** and fury.

II. The Timing of God’s Wrath (1:18b)

Second, the timing of God’s wrath is seen in the fact that it is **being revealed**. The Greek tense indicates that God’s wrath is *continually being revealed*, perpetually being manifested.

God’s wrath has always been revealed to sinful people. God’s wrath 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, because Adam was the federal head of all humanity, on all their descendants.

God’s wrath was revealed in the Flood, when God drowned the entire human race except for eight people.

God’s wrath was revealed in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah when two whole cities were destroyed because of sin.

God’s wrath was revealed in the drowning of Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea when they were chasing the Israelites.

¹ Richard Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 134.

God's wrath was constantly revealed in the pages of Scripture against sin. As British commentator Geoffrey B. Wilson wrote, "God is no idle spectator of world events. He is dynamically active in human affairs. The conviction of sin is constantly punctuated by Divine judgment."²

"But," someone might say, "I don't see God's wrath being revealed today. I see wicked people prospering and many committing evil with utter impunity." We need to remember that God usually delays the execution of his wrath upon sinful men and women. Paul writes to the Romans in Romans 2:5-6, "But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God 'will give to each person according to what he has done.'"

Donald Grey Barnhouse, pastor of the historic Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia in the middle part of the last century, tells 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 his accounts in the month of October."³

III. The Extent of God's Wrath (1:18c)

Third, the extent of God's wrath is universal, being revealed

² Geoffrey B. Wilson, *Romans: A Digest of Reformed Comment* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, n.d.), 24.

³ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Man's Ruin: Romans 1:1-32* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), 220.

from heaven **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 in Romans 3:9, 23, “that Jews and Gentiles alike are *all* under sin. . . . for *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Obviously, some people are morally more depraved than others, but even the most moral and upright person falls far short of God’s standard of perfect righteousness. No one escapes the wrath of God.

Man’s relative goodness compared to God’s perfect standard can be illustrated by a hypothetical jump across the Grand Canyon. Even at its narrowest point, the Grand Canyon is still 4 miles wide. Some people could not manage to jump at all, many could jump a few feet, and a rare few could manage twenty to twenty-five feet. The longest conceivable jump, however, would cover only the smallest fraction of the distance required (despite what the computer-enhanced advertisements can do). The most moral person in the world has as little chance of achieving God’s righteousness in his own power as the best athlete has of making that jump from the one side of the Grand Canyon to the other. Everybody falls short. **All** of us are the proper recipients of God’s wrath.

IV. The Focus of God’s Wrath (1:18d)

Fourth, the focus of God’s wrath is against all **the godlessness and wickedness of men.**

Godlessness refers to a 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 judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him” (Jude 15). Four times Enoch uses the term *ungodly* to describe the focus of God’s

wrath upon sinful people.

Wickedness encompasses the idea of godlessness 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. **Godlessness** unavoidably leads to **wickedness**. 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.

In the 1960s psychologist Dr. Stanton Samenow and psychiatrist Dr. Samuel Yochelson, sharing the conventional wisdom that crime is caused by environment, set out to prove their point. They began a seventeen-year study, published in 1977, titled, *The Criminal Personality*. To their own astonishment, they discovered that the cause of crime cannot be traced to environment, to poverty or oppression. Instead, crime is the result of individuals making, as they put it, "wrong *moral* choices" (italics mine).⁴

God hates sin. God does not hate poor people or rich people, oppressed people or free people, dumb people or smart people, un-talented people or skilled people. He hates the sin that those people, indeed all people, naturally practice, and sin then inevitably brings the wrath of God.

V. The Cause of God's Wrath (1:18e)

Finally, the cause of God's wrath is that men **suppress the truth by their wickedness**.

"But how is it," someone might 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 his sinful disposition, every single person in the world

⁴ Charles Colson, *Dangerous Grace* ((Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1994), 179.

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.” **Wickedness** 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 verse 19, “Since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.” 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.

God guarantees that any person who sincerely seeks him will find him. “You will seek me and find me,” he promises, “when you seek me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13).

But men and women are not naturally inclined to seek to God. That truth was proved conclusively in the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ. Even when face-to-face with God incarnate, the Light of the world, “men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed” (John 3:19-20). As King David had proclaimed hundreds of years earlier, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good” (Psalm 14:1). Sinful men and women 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.

Many years ago, while on a visit to America, a wealthy Chinese businessman was fascinated by a powerful microscope. Looking through its lens to study crystals and the petals of flowers, he was amazed at their beauty and detail. So he decided to purchase one of these devices and take it back to China.

He thoroughly enjoyed using it until one day he examined some rice he was planning to eat for dinner. Much to his dismay, he discovered that tiny living creatures were crawling in it. Since

he was especially fond of this staple food in his daily diet, he wondered what to do. Finally he concluded that there was only one way out of his dilemma—he would destroy the instrument that caused him to discover the distasteful fact! So he smashed the microscope to pieces.

“How foolish!” you say. But many people do the same thing with the Word of God. They hate it and reject it because it reveals not only their sin but also the wrath of God.

Conclusion

Arguably the most powerful sermon ever preached on American soil was preached on July 8, 1741 in Enfield, Connecticut. On that day Jonathan Edwards preached the now-famous sermon titled, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

In this sermon Edwards demonstrated from his text, Deuteronomy 32:35 (“Their foot shall slide in due time”), that God is angry with sinful men and that they are not yet in hell because of his sovereign will. Edwards states the proposition for his sermon in the following words: “There is nothing that keeps wicked men at any one moment out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God.”

Perhaps I could capture the thrust of Jonathan Edwards’s sermon in the following words:

. . . Thus it is that natural men are held in the hand of God, over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked, his anger is as great towards them as to those that are actually suffering the executions of the fierceness of his wrath in hell, and they have done nothing in the least to appease or abate that anger, neither is God in the least bound by any promise to hold them up one moment; the devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them, and would fain lay hold on them, and swallow them up; the fire pent up in their own hearts is struggling to break out: and they have no interest in any Mediator, there are no means within reach that can be any security to them.

In short, they have no refuge, nothing to take hold of; all that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and uncovenanted, unobliged forbearance of an incensed God.

The use of this awful subject may be for awakening unconverted persons in this congregation. This that you have heard is the case of every one of you that are out of Christ. That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone, is extended abroad under you. There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell's wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor any thing to take hold of; there is nothing between you and hell but the air; it is only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up.⁵

But the good news of the gospel is this: “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8b). Because God’s law has been broken, the penalty for sin must be paid. God demands that in order for him to maintain his righteousness and justice.

God’s wrath must be poured out on one of two individuals: on me *or* on Jesus Christ. As a sinner I am under the wrath of God. But thanks be to God because Jesus will receive the wrath of God in my place—if I repent of my sin, and trust in his righteousness alone.

Oh, how thankful I am to God for the Lord Jesus Christ who bore all my sin and endured the wrath of God on my behalf. My response is to thank and praise him for his grace to me. My response is to recommit myself to him in love and obedience.

Is that your response too?

Do you know for sure that you are the recipient of the grace of God and not the wrath of God? If you are not sure, I would encourage you to simply ask God to grant you his grace. Ask God to pour his wrath on the Lord Jesus Christ instead of on you. Turn from your sin. And walk in grateful obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ who received the wrath of God on your behalf. Amen.

⁵ Jonathan Edwards in a sermon titled, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons
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PRAYER:

Adapted from “The Cry of a Convicted Sinner” (p. 38) in *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions*:

O Righteous and Holy Sovereign, in whose hand is our lives and all our ways, keep us from fluttering about religion; fix us firm in you, for we are irresolute; our decisions are smoke and vapor, and we do not glorify you, or behave according to your will.

Cut us not off before our thoughts grow to responses, and the budding of our souls into full flower, for you are forbearing and good, patient and kind.

Save us from ourselves, from the artifices and deceits of sin, from the treachery of our perverse natures, from denying your charge against our offences, from a life of continual rebellion against you, from wrong principles, views, and ends; for we know that our thoughts, affections, desires and pursuits are alienated from you.

We have acted as if we hated you, although you are love itself; have contrived to tempt you to the uttermost, to wear out your patience; have lived evilly in word and action.

Had we been a prince we would have long ago crushed such a rebel; Had we been a father we would have long since rejected such a child.

O Father of our spirits, king of our lives, cast us not into destruction, drive us not from your presence, but wound our hearts that they may be healed; break them that your own hand may make them whole. And all of this we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.