

GOD'S WRATH IS BEING REVEALED AGAINST UNRIGHTEOUSNESS

Romans 1:18-32

Key Verse: 1:18

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness....”

Romans 1:17 says that in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed. This is the theme of Romans. To develop this theme, Paul first explains why we need the righteousness of God that is revealed in the gospel. In 1:18-3:20, he portrays sinful humanity and declares that no one is righteous. He paints a dark background against which the gospel shines brightly. To accept the gospel, we must first recognize that we are sinful and guilty under God's condemnation. It is like being diagnosed with a fatal disease. As people don't like hearing that they have a fatal disease, we don't like hearing that we are sinners. But without accepting the truth about our fatal condition, we ignore the gospel message. Accepting that we are sinners is crucial, though it is painful. Paul gives a universal indictment of all mankind, showing conclusively that all are sinners. Paul first looked at the depraved Gentile world that lived without God (1:18-32). Then he examined moralizers, whether Jew or Gentile, who have a high moral standard which they apply to others but not themselves (2:1-16). Then he turned to the Jews who boasted about the law but did not obey it (2:17-3:8). Finally, he concluded that all human beings are guilty, without excuse, and deserve God's righteous judgment (3:9-20).

In today's passage, Paul indicts the fallen Gentiles who live without God. In this short passage, the personal pronouns **“they,” “their,”** and **“them,”** are repeated 29 times. These pronouns refer to godless and wicked people who suppress the truth about God. This is a general description of the fallen Gentile world. When Paul wrote this letter, he had in mind the Roman Empire. It was the most powerful, civilized and prosperous in the world. Romans were widely envied as the most noble, fortunate and gorgeous people on earth. But when Paul saw the Romans with God's eyes, they were most miserable in their idolatry and immorality and engaging in all kinds of wicked behavior. They were indeed objects of God's wrath. This is the worldview Paul had. As Christians, we should have the same worldview. To have this worldview we need to truly know who God is. In this passage, **“God,”**

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“**Creator**” or an associated pronoun are repeated 18 times. We tend to make our own gods in our minds and hearts, based on what we like. But we should know God based on the Bible. The Bible clearly reveals that God is righteous. Let’s see who God is and how we should see the world.

The theme of today’s passage is the wrath of God. When we hear the words “**the wrath of God,**” we become uneasy and tremble. Nevertheless, we need to understand what the wrath of God is (18a), what it is revealed against (18-21a), and how it is revealed (21b-32).

First, what the wrath of God is (18a). Verse 18 begins with the words, “**The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven....**” Many people misunderstand the wrath of God as though it is like human anger. Usually human anger is aroused when one’s pride is hurt. It is expressed as an irrational, emotional, uncontrollable reaction that comes from vanity and animosity. As it progresses it is marked by malice and vengeance. God’s wrath is quite different than this. God does not lose his temper, fly into a rage and become malicious and vindictive.¹ God’s wrath is his righteous anger at evil. God never condones evil but judges it and stands against it. The opposite of God’s wrath is not love, but indifference. For example, when children do evil, their parents get angry and correct them with a rebuke. This comes from love. Some parents ignore or condone their children’s evildoing without discernment. This is not love, and in the long run their children’s lives will be ruined. We can find repeatedly in the Old Testament, that when the Lord’s people worshiped idols, his anger burned against them. God’s anger is the expression of his love for his people. Some people ignore God’s wrath, emphasizing God’s love. They reason that if God is love, he will not send anyone to everlasting punishment. But they greatly misunderstand God’s love. God’s love is holy love. It must be sincere, hating what is evil and clinging to what is good (Ro 12:9). It does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth (1Co 13:6). God is too pure to look on evil (Hab 1:13). In his righteous character, the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven. God hates sin and judges it but loves sinners and desires their salvation.

Second, what God’s wrath is revealed against (18-21a). Read verse 18. “**The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the**

¹ Stott, John R. W., *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), p. 72.

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godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness...." God's wrath is being revealed, not simply against people, but against the godlessness and wickedness of people. Godlessness is ignoring God's existence and living against God. **"Wickedness" is doing evil against other people.** Many people justify godless and wicked behavior, thinking there will be no consequence. However, God's wrath is continually revealed against such behavior without fail. In fact, such people suppress the truth by their godlessness and wickedness. In verses 19-21a we can see how they do so.

They suppress the truth by deliberately ignoring God's existence. Verses 19 and 20 say, **"...since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."** Simply speaking, God clearly reveals himself to mankind through his creation. We call this "general revelation." This is different from "special revelation," which comes through Scripture. General revelation is made to everyone, everywhere, while special revelation is made to particular people in particular times and places. General revelation is natural, while special revelation is supernatural. General revelation is continuous until the end of the age, while special revelation is final and finished through Christ. General revelation is regarding creation, while special revelation is regarding salvation through Christ.²

What can we see through general revelation? When we see Rembrandt's "The Return of the Prodigal Son," we can sense the spirit and message of the artist. In the same way, through creation we can clearly see God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature. Observing God's creation, a Swedish man, Carl Boberg said, *"It was that time of year when everything seemed to be in its richest colouring; the birds were singing in trees and everywhere. It was very warm; a thunderstorm appeared on the horizon and soon there was thunder and lightning. We had to hurry to shelter. But the storm was soon over and the clear sky appeared...That evening, I wrote "How Great Thou Art."*³ "O Lord, my God, when I in awesome

² Ibid., p. 73.

³ Carl Boberg, quoted in Michael Ireland, "Velikiy Bog: How Great is Our God! The story behind how a thunderstorm in Sweden prompted the writing of How Great Thou Art, one of Christianity's greatest and much-loved hymns" ASSIST News Service (2007).

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wonder Consider all the worlds thy hands have made...” When we see Niagara Falls, the Rocky Mountains, the Pacific Ocean, and myriad stars in the clear night sky, we cannot but praise the Creator God. The same happens when we see beautifully colored flowers of innumerable varieties, so many kinds of interesting, distinctive animals, or a newborn baby. The great scientist Einstein said, *“We are in the position of a little child entering a huge library filled with books in many different languages. The child knows someone must have written those books. It does not know how. It does not understand the languages in which they are written. The child dimly suspects a mysterious order in the arrangement of the books but doesn't know what it is. That seems to me, is the attitude of even the most intelligent being toward God. We see a universe marvelously arranged and obeying certain laws, but only dimly understand those laws. Our limited minds cannot grasp the mysterious force that moves the constellations.”*⁴ It is obvious that all things were made by an intelligent, powerful, artistic Designer. Creation is so wonderful that some people worship it as God. We call this pantheism; it is a wrong concept of God. God is holy; he is distinct from his creation. In this part, Paul’s point is that no one has an excuse to deny God’s existence. Anyone who does deceives themselves and deliberately suppresses the truth. It is man’s willful rebellion against God.

How is this willful rebellion expressed? Verse 21a says, **“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him....”** The words, **“although they knew God”** reiterate that no one can deny God’s existence because he revealed himself through creation. They also indicate that all human beings have a definite, innate knowledge of God. This is why atheists who are in a crisis suddenly cry out subconsciously, “O my God! Help me!” Anthropologists tell us that wherever people have gathered throughout history, there are altars of worship. The skeptical philosopher, David Hume, said: *“Look out for a people, entirely destitute of religion: If you find them at all, be assured, that they are but few degrees removed from brutes.”*⁵ In truth, human beings are not satisfied with mere material existence and long for eternity (Ecc 3:11). There are so many evidences that people know God. Since they know God, they should glorify him and give thanks to him. The Creator God is worthy to receive glory, worship, honor and praise from all human beings (Rev 4:11). However, people neither glorify God as

⁴ Einstein, in a 1929 interview, in Denis Brian, *Einstein: A Life* (NY: J. Wiley, 1996), p. 186.

⁵ https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/David_Hume

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God, nor give thanks to him. This is human pride, the root of sin; it is how willful rebellion is expressed. This is what God reveals his wrath against.

Third, how the wrath of God is revealed (21b-32). We may imagine that the wrath of God is revealed through fiery sulfur from heaven as it was upon Sodom and Gomorrah. That was an expression of God's wrath, but it is not what Paul has in mind here. Rather, he describes the quiet and invisible result within people and society. Verse 21b says, **"...but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened."** It starts from their thought world. Their reason becomes corrupt. Out of their corrupt minds come many useless, worthless thoughts. These thoughts and ideas make people sick. Furthermore, their hearts become foolish, darkened and fatalistic, which leads to fear and anxiety. Then they look for something to depend on. Finally, although they claim to be wise, they became fools and exchange the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles (22-23). In a word, they degenerate into idol worshipers. In the Greco-Roman world, many deities were worshiped, such as Jupiter, Diana, Apollo, Mars, Venus, and even Portunus - the god of keys, ports and livestock. The emperor was also worshiped as god. In addition, animals, birds and reptiles - such as elephants, cows, monkeys, pigs, wolves, hawks, beetles, and even snakes - were worshiped. Roman families also worshiped household gods, including part beast, part human deities. This is not just an ancient story. In our times, celebrity, money, power and pleasure are idols. Human beings, who bear the image of God, should be noble, honorable and dignified. But when they abandon God they degenerate to a level lower than the animals. This is not a theory, it is reality.

What happens to idolaters? Verses 24, 26, and 28 include the words, **"God gave them over."** This is another expression of God's wrath. It is not the active outpouring of punishment, but the removal of restraint that allows sinners to reap the inevitable consequences of their rebellion. This giving over has a redemptive element. For example, in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, the father allows his son to leave home and experience the misery of life without him. It was very painful for the father, but he did this in the hope of future reconciliation. What, then, does God give people over to?

Verse 24 says, **"Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with**

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one another.” Sexual immorality follows idolatry, as world history affirms. Sex is a beautiful gift from God, to be enjoyed only in marriage, for procreation and to ennoble human beings. But when people worship idols, this gift is perverted and abused in all kinds of illicit activity that degrades people's bodies and humanity. The result is the ruin of one's character, broken families, unwanted pregnancies and abortion. As intimate trust relationships break down, society totally corrupts from the inside out. History says that because of this, the Roman Empire collapsed. We see many similar signs in our times. When Paul thought about all the corrupted, perverted phenomenon in the godless world, he felt deeply sorry. In verse 25, he summarized the fallen condition of mankind and then broke into a doxology: **“They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator - who is forever praised. Amen.”**

Once people are enslaved by sexual immorality, they cannot be satisfied with natural relations between men and women. In their shameful lusts, they degenerate into unnatural relationships. Women have sexual relationships with other women, and men commit indecent acts with other men (26-27a). This is against God's created order. God created mankind male and female. God instituted marriage as a heterosexual union. Jesus upheld this truth. He said, **“At the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh”** (Mk 10:6-7). To redefine marriage or gender identity is a perversion of God's truth. Those who do so will experience the consequences. Lustful and indecent acts have within themselves the seeds of punishment (27b), which includes physical, emotional, mental and spiritual misery.

The consequences of idolatry and sexual immorality are so terrible. But degeneration goes beyond this: **“Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done”** (28). A depraved mind is totally corrupted and enables any kind of evil action. It is the lowest level a person can reach. Paul describes in detail: **“They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways**

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of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy” (29-31). Nowadays, unspeakably evil things have been happening, such as widespread sexual abuse, random mass murders, and serial killings. Yet perpetrators have no sense of guilt. Our society seems to be filled with lies and deception. We wonder why these things are happening continually. It is because people became depraved. This is God's wrath on those who abandon him. Anne Graham Lotz has said, *“For years we've been telling God to get out of our schools, to get out of our government and to get out of our lives. And being the gentleman He is, I believe He has calmly backed out. How can we expect God to give us His blessing and His protection if we demand He leave us alone?”*⁶ Inscribed on our currency and coins is the motto, “In God we trust.” When we trust in God, we can trust each other and build up a good society. Without God, we gradually degenerate into chaos. The most terrible thing is that people don't regard sin as sin but justify themselves. Verse 32 says, **“Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.”** People justify themselves using all kinds of philosophy, psychology, and social media. By doing this they try to get rid of guilt feelings so that people may freely commit sin. In this way, ungodly people form an ungodly culture.

In this passage we can see that when people abandon God they get worse and worse. It starts with the thought world, desires and behavior, and leads to the perversion of one's character. Family relationships break down and the society becomes filled with corruption, evil and violence. People try to solve these problems with education, socio-economic systems, political ideologies, moral reform movements and the like. But it does not work. The real problems will only be solved when people return to God. Sometimes we think that people living without God are carefree and happy. We may envy them; then our desire to serve God weakens. But those who live without God become slaves of idolatry, immorality and depravity. There is true freedom and happiness only in God. This is why David confessed, **“I say to the Lord, “You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing”** (Ps 16:2).

⁶ http://www.azquotes.com/author/16944-Anne_Graham_Lotz

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God is holy and righteous. He never condones evil. When people abandon God and become evil, God's wrath inevitably comes. This is the expression of God's love. God hates sin to the point that he crucified his one and only Son. God poured out his wrath on his Son so that his righteousness could be satisfied. God loves sinners so much, to the point that he crucified his only Son as a ransom sacrifice for our sins. God is worthy to receive all honor, glory and praise from all human beings because he is the Creator God and Redeemer. Let's glorify him and give thanks to him. Let's have a Biblical worldview and recognize how badly this fallen world needs the gospel.