

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

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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. It would be pleasant not to have to 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 have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).

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.

Well, I have been called of God to deliver all of the messages of God, regardless of how people may respond. Often it will be my pleasure to bring tidings of good news. But sometimes I must preach the bad news about man’s condition, and God’s wrath and judgment against sin. You see, there is tremendous value in preaching such bad news. For only when people truly believe the bad news about their sinful condition, they will seek 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, he 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.

V.18 begins the first main section of the book of Romans, which deals with the guilt of mankind, and the wrath of God. It’s as if Paul begins to set forth the case of the prosecution, and every person is accused of being guilty before God. Because of sin and unbelief, we are unable to claim a favorable verdict at the judgment bar of God.

We shall see that Paul charges that *everyone* is under the wrath of 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 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. All people need to be made right with God. The need of righteousness ought to bring man to the Source of all righteousness. His 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. 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. Habakkuk wrote, “You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness” (1:13). God is love toward the sinner, but God’s wrath is against sin. The righteousness of God reacts with wrath against sin. This wrath grows out of His holiness.

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 any sound judgment. On their way home, imagine that 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? Indeed, and I would experience wrath toward the alcohol industry that sells the stuff. Habakkuk 2:15 says, “Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbor, pressing him to your bottle, even to make him drunk...” 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 in 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.

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.¹ 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 with a bad temper. He is not going to blow up in anger every time you sin against Him. His wrath is much more settled. The Bible declares that He is slow to anger. But as mankind continues to sin, and continues to reject Him, you can be sure that His wrath is building to the point that some day 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. Even so, the store of God’s wrath grows greater and greater, held back by the 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 the book of Revelation.

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 something. And if you think that, then you just do not understand the true nature of the wrath of God.

The story is told that the godly farmers in a western community were greatly shocked one summer Sunday morning when they drove up to the little country church to see that the man who owned 40 acres across from the church was in the midst of plowing, & had evidently been at it for some time. The people went on into the church and could hear the rise and fall of the noise of the

¹ 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*.

tractor as it approached and then went on to the other side of the field. In the weeks that followed, he deliberately worked the field closest to the church only on Sunday. By the end of the season, he found that that field did very well. In fact, his field had the highest yield/acre of any farm in the county. The skeptic wrote the editor of the local paper, explaining what he had done, and challenged Christians to explain this. The editor printed the skeptic's letter and added the following sentence, "God does not settle His accounts in the month of October." [Barnhouse, 220].

Do you understand how that fits in with the true concept of the wrath of God that we read in v.18? God's wrath is not like human wrath. It doesn't explode quickly, or unpredictably. A person can even shake their fist at God and curse God, but God is longsuffering toward us. He will usually hold back His wrath to give us more time to repent (2 Pet. 3:9).

But 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:

II. THE REVELATION OF WRATH OF GOD

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 the divine displeasure. 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. Don't try to plead ignorance regarding the wrath of God. 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.

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

A. In Our Conscience - I believe the truth of God's wrath against sin is revealed in the conscience of man. Deep down inside we know we have sinned against a holy God, and that leads to a sense of guilt. Look over at Romans 2:15, "who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them." The human race has always had an indwelling sense of the justice of God and the need to satisfy this justice. The history of man is a long history of sacrifice or religious ritual to appease the wrath of God.

B. In Nature - We can see the curse 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. In fact, Paul said in Acts 14:17, "He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness." But we see His wrath illustrated in earthquakes and violent storms, such as the recent tornadoes that took over 50 lives and destroyed much property. Then, what about the multitudes of diseases that bring suffering & death? Some diseases are more directly related to sinful behaviors, such as AIDS, venereal diseases, and diseases related to 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 bondage to 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 that mankind is sinful and under the wrath of God?

I believe we can see evidence of the revelation of the wrath of God in the evidences for a great flood. 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 the pre-flood world became exceedingly sinful, and brought upon themselves the wrath of God.

C. In the Word of God - The wrath of God is clearly revealed in the Old Testament. But it is also revealed in the New Testament as well. Acts 17:31 says that "He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained." Judgment will be followed by wrath. 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. God's wrath will be poured out upon this world around the time of the Second Coming of Christ.

We also see the revelation of the wrath of God:

D. 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 & 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. The sun grew dark; night fell upon the earth at noon, and the raging waves of God's wrath flooded upon the Lord Jesus.

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.

I believe we see an illustration of this in Revelation chapter 8. There we read of a scene in heaven in which a messenger, perhaps the Lord Jesus Himself, proceeds to the altar, takes a censer filled with coals of fire from the altar, and pours it out upon the earth. Cataclysmic judgments follow. Now what is an altar mainly for? It is to offer up sacrifices for sin. The altar is the means of salvation. But in that scene it is instrumental in judgment. The lesson should be clear. If you do not accept God's offer of forgiveness through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, then there is nothing left but the outpouring of God's wrath against sinners who reject Christ.

So the evidence of the wrath of God is very clear. We need to take that evidence very seriously, and flee from the wrath to come, as John the Baptist said in Matthew 3:7.

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. And so Paul gives two reasons why God's wrath is just and right. One reason for God's wrath is:

A. Because of Sin – In the last half 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.” “Ungodliness” is a general word for all sin against God. It especially refers to impiety toward God, a lack of reverence and worship of the true God. Many people speak God’s name in vain. They see no need to worship God with others. “Unrighteousness” may in this case primary refer to sin & injustice against our fellow man, though it includes sin against God. Because of our sin, we are 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.”

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.” They 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 the truth about God. The knowledge of the true God was accessible to men, but they closed their minds to it. Their lives are not affected by the truth. Deep down they know that there is one true God, who is righteous and holy. People 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. Just watch what happens if someone suggests that the evidence for divine creation should be taught in the public school science classroom! 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.” [Illus.#C-466].

Some may argue that many people do not have this truth about God, especially the heathen in some far away place. But Paul says in v.19 that all people do have this knowledge of the truth about God, “because what may be known of God is manifest in them,² for 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. Now he explains in v.20 what everyone can know about God, “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that 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. 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. In other words, there is a Divine Being. So great an effect must have an even greater cause. Furthermore, one divine attribute that is specifically mentioned is His eternal power. His power was manifested in the beginning of time in the creation event.

The creation around us is indeed a witness that there is a Supreme Being. From creation we can clearly see that there is a God, and He is very powerful. In fact, He is omnipotent. God has left the imprints of His glory upon His handiwork. Think of the power of the sun! It provides enough heat to warm this planet though it is millions of miles away. Then go out some night and see all the stars. We know that most stars are much larger than our sun. Imagine all the power of all the stars combined. And just think, the stars that we can see with the naked eye make up just a fraction of

² What everyone knows from creation should be internalized in the heart and mind of man. That is why Paul says “what may be known of God is manifest in them.” However, “in them” could be translated “among them.”

all the stars in the universe! Now the Creator must be greater than the creation, so there is a God of omnipotent power.

Another invisible attribute of God that is manifest in creation is the wisdom & supreme intelligence of God. 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 & worship Him. The DNA code is an amazing example of divine programming. 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, & reprogrammed in response to various situations.³

Now what should we conclude from God's manifestation of Himself in creation? In Acts 17:27 Paul tells the Athenians what should be the result of God revealing Himself in creation, "so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us." Illustration: 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."⁴

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 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.

Now if there is someone out there who is that powerful, I want to make sure that He and I are on good terms! Right? 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 the evidence so he can live his life as he pleases. Such people will certainly experience the wrath of God some day 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 & 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 an

³ Francis Mark Mondimore, *Bipolar Disorder*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: John's Hopkins Univ. Press, 2006), 78.

⁴ John Gilimartin, *Sermon Illustrations Each Week*.

eternally violent end.⁵ You can deny God, and suppress the truth of God all you want, but that does not remove the reality of God, 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, "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides 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 far away 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. May God give us a burden for souls!

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); Leon McBeth, *Exegetical & Practical Commentary on Romans* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1937); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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⁵ J. Kenneth Bassett, *Timeless Signatures*. 2003, www.timeless signatures.org.