

THE WRATH OF GOD

Romans 1:18

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"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18).

In all the intricacies and difficulties of Romans we are probably the most comfortable with chapter one. Its material represents the beginning of Paul's elaborate arguments to show that all people are sinners. Unfortunately, in the discussion of the terrible sins listed in chapter one a key thought of this text can be lost: God's wrath. It is this thought that leads and introduces the entire section, yet rarely do we hear an explanation of God's wrath, how it works, and why it is "being revealed against all unrighteousness of men." This article proposes to examine this crucial subject, that we might have a fresh appreciation and understanding of a neglected aspect of God's character.

God's wrath is not anger out of control. An angry God bothers some so much that they take every tack possible to remove the obvious meaning of the text. One scholar argued that Paul did not mean to indicate a personal reaction on God's part but the reaction of a "moral universe." All such attempts seem grounded in the idea that anger is inherently wrong and sinful, and so a lot of anger (a fairly common definition of wrath) would really be wrong and sinful. The Bible teaches otherwise. "Be angry, and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your wrath" (Ephesians 4:26). Anger is not always irrational. Jesus was angered at hard hearts (Mk. 3:5; Jn. 2:15-16). What feeling should such callousness as the Pharisees exhibited evoke in our Lord? To see sin ruining lives, both now and in eternity, and not be angry at the devil and foolish people who allow themselves to be taken by him is unthinkable. Righteousness loves light, and hates darkness (John 3:20). Thus, every expression of darkness must be met with righteous indignation or anger.

However, there is an enormous amount of difference in human anger and divine wrath. In a time when child abuse is widely reported it is important that our Heavenly Father not be portrayed as some sort of raging tyrant, mindlessly and wildly hurting His children. This portrait of God is painted when people decide God's wrath is like man's wrath. "God gets angry like we get angry," our human mind can think, "only His anger is bigger and more powerful." In reality, most human anger is not righteous anger, and so James affirms: "So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath, for the wrath of man does

not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:19-20). We get angry because our egos have been slighted, and because we did not get our way. Further, human anger usually expresses itself in ways that are hurtful to others around us. God's anger in no way resembles our (sinful) anger. God is not angry because He has some gigantic ego that we have failed to gratify. His righteous anger is directed at evil people who refuse to be what He made them to be and thus hurt themselves. He is angry at the senselessness of men and women who send themselves to hell because they will not heed His word. Additionally, as we shall see, Paul develops the critical point that even the expression of God's wrath is not designed to hurt sinful man but bring him to his senses that he will return to his maker and be saved.

God's wrath is not incompatible with the preaching of the Gospel. Contextually, this is an interesting place for Paul to bring up God's wrath. He has just hit the high point of chapter one in his wonderful expression that the Gospel is "the power of God for salvation to every one . . . for in it the righteousness of God is revealed . . ." (vv. 16-17). How can Paul inject the dark notes of God's justice into the delightful melody of salvation? The answer is that Paul does not see the wrath of God as being incompatible with the Gospel's message. While many people wish to separate grace from judgement, Calvary from hell, love from wrath Paul shows us that it cannot be done. Yes, the Gospel is good news but it is only good news for those who receive it. For those that disregard its saving power the Gospel reveals the wrath and judgement of God directed toward all sin. The Gospel also reveals sinful attitudes and behaviors, as Paul will go on to list very specifically (vv. 21-32).

It is interesting that in our day "fire and brimstone" preaching is considered dreadfully old-fashioned and out of date. While Puritan preachers were renowned for sermons that suspended the audience over the very fires of hell some preaching today seems to disdain to even mention eternal condemnation. In truth, many of those Puritan preachers may have over-emphasized judgement and condemnation, and may have been guilty of just giving the audience a good scare for the entertainment value such terrifying sermons packed. Realizing this as an extreme surely we can see the mistake of going to the other extreme and deciding never to speak of God's righteous wrath, the day of judgement, or the plain truth that not everyone will go to heaven. Jesus was remarkably unafraid to discuss hell in explicit detail. Shall his followers be reluctant to tell the truth as Jesus did? Yes, talking about hell is a frightful thing, and thinking about going there is not enough to make the hair bristle on the back of your neck. So it ought to be! God's wrath is not to be trifled with, people will account for their deeds some day, and some folks (yes, many folks) will be lost. Something is going to happen to everyone's soul and we need to carefully contemplate the two possible choices that we would make the right choice. Let our pulpits and Bible classes and private meditation be full of thoughts of heaven and joy, but also be balanced with thoughts that it is indeed a "fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

God's wrath is being currently expressed. Usually our thoughts about the wrath of God track along as expressed above, i.e. God's wrath is expressed in final judgement. Yet this is not what Paul says. Verse 18 clearly states that God's wrath "is revealed" (present tense), not God's wrath "will be revealed" (future tense). What does this mean? How is God's wrath being expressed even now?

The answer is found in the phrase "God gave them over," used three times in the passages from 21-32. We are told that God gave them (sinful Gentiles who refused to acknowledge Him as God) over to the lusts of their hearts (v. 24), degrading passions (v. 26), and to a depraved mind (v.28). This expression "gave them over" is a technical term that referred to what one did with a convicted criminal: he or she is given over to be punished. So Paul tells us that sinners are being punished right now by God "giving them over." God's wrath is expressed presently by this decision of God's to "give them over."

Further examination of the text shows this to be true. The crime these are guilty of is rejecting the knowledge of God (v. 21) and the punishment is God giving them over to do as they wish to do. When people turn away from God He will not force them to come back and serve Him (though He has the power to do so). No, instead God releases people to do as they want. God gives them over to the evil desires in their hearts (v. 24), to do things that not even animals would do and which only debase humanity (v. 26), and to minds so infected with sin that they will rationalize every kind of iniquity (v. 32).

In some ways this may seem like a punishment that anyone would enjoy. Most children would love to be told "Since you were naughty I'm going to allow you to do whatever you want to do." But what would the end result of such a punishment be? Would it teach the child self-control, discipline and endurance so necessary to be productive and useful in life? Or would the child ultimately end up a mess of uncivilized passions, completely dominated by selfishness? So the listing of sins concludes: "who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them" (verse 32). Man decides that he does not want to know about God or serve Him, so God will allow men and women to do as they please, push God far from their thoughts and live exactly as they want to. The end result is that humanity is in a sorry state, miserable beyond words, and totally trapped in its own evil deeds.

Surely God's wrath could be expressed in a different form. He could, for example, strike everyone dead who did the terrible sins Paul lists in our text. But that would not work to bring people to repentance. We should remember how the Prodigal Son's father allowed the boy to live in the pig pen knowing that only if he learned the misery of sin could he truly come home. In the same way, God "gives people over" to the horrors of sin in hope that they will see their sad condition and repent. Understanding this we realize that God's giving people up to such a life is an expression of His wrath, but also shows His current ongoing concern and love for their souls.

The key to all of this is the vantage point of faith. Only when we have faith in the Gospel can we see the futility of this life. Only when we believe in God's wrath and judgement can we see that men and women are presently experiencing that wrath in the lifestyle God is allowing them to live. Only when we trust God's merciful love can we see that He is trying to bring them to repentance by causing them to know the vanity of sin.

God's wrath is not a pleasant topic of discussion. It ought to thoroughly frighten us to contemplate being on the receiving end of the wrath of the Almighty. But whether we want to think about it, enjoying thinking about it, or care to think about it is not the issue. God's wrath

is part of His character and we do well to understand it and live righteously because of it. The words of Romans 1:18 will not fail. God's wrath is revealed will your manner of life cause you to receive it?

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