The Wrath of God

Romans 1:18-32

Romans 1:18 begins a section that will end in 3:20 saying, “for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.” In various ways Paul will point out the sinfulness of humanity throughout this entire section. Even though many godly people lived before the coming of Christ, they were all under the reign of sin since the fall of man. Paul starts off explaining God’s reaction to the fall of man.

I. God’s Wrath Explained

Synonyms for “wrath” are ‘great anger’, ‘fury’, and ‘vengeance’. Thus when we speak about God’s rage, fury, anger, vengeance, or wrath, it is no light description. It is humanity’s greatest problem and greatest fear. But first let us explain God’s wrath in more detail.

A. Wrath: Not From Eternity-Past

God’s wrath against sin and evil has not been manifested from eternity past. Yes, hell will be everlasting for those who go there, and therein God’s wrath will forever burn. But there was a time in the past when hell did not exist because there was nothing with which God to be angry. This is important to acknowledge because God’s wrath is a judicial response to whatever offends Him. When sin invaded God’s creation it was then that God’s wrath was revealed against it.

B. Wrath: The Necessary and Right Response

When evil and sin first emerged through the fall of Satan and man, God’s wrath was the necessary response. Wrath is His personal reaction to sin because every sin is personally offensive to God. The essence of sin or evil is that it is ungodly, or anti-God. Whether done passively or actively, it is always an attack, a treason, a rebellion, and a hatred against God Himself. Evil is utterly foreign to God’s being and His creation, therefore He necessarily responds against it with a righteous fury.

The justice of God’s wrath is demonstrated in that He is not wrathful against an ignorant humanity. Notice how often in this passage Paul stresses that people know the truth. In four verses (19,21,28,32) Paul points out that people have a knowledge of God, His attributes, truth, and judgments. This truth of God is simply suppressed under their own unrighteousness. Therefore, God’s wrath is just and righteous since it is inflamed against a fallen and knowledge-possessing humanity.

C. Wrath: The Universal Problem

Since Paul emphasizes that these people know the truth of God, it has led some to believe that Paul is writing about Jews and not Gentiles. Some consider that since the Jews knew God’s truth through the Scripture, then they are the specific ones guilty of suppressing the truth. But we can not accept this explanation because Paul is not talking about God’s truth revealed through Scripture. He is speaking about God’s truth revealed through creation. Paul claims that everyone born into the world knows the truth of God, His judgments, and His attributes. In other words, the sobering reality is that all humanity knows more than they realize. There is not one person who is entirely ignorant of the truth of God.
Like a diamond buried under a mountain of granite rock, so is the truth of God suppressed under man’s wickedness. That mountain of sin consists of our sin inherited by Adam, our habitual daily sins, and the twisted logic which used to justify evil desires and religious superstition. Along with more age and deceit that hardened mountain of sin grows larger and larger, yet nevertheless God’s truth lies suppressed and buried under it.

Too often we have heard it said that various uneducated and pagan people living out in the jungle are simply “ignorant” of God. This is emphatically false according the Paul. The knowledge they have of God is simply suppressed by their own inherited sin, daily sins, superstitions of the world, demonic forces, and a countless number of influences by which they are willfully enslaved to a fallen world.

The grain of God’s truth – no matter how small it may be – which they have buried under their ‘Mount Everest of Sin’ means that they are liable and deserving of God’s wrath for eternity. In other words, the suppressed truth with which all men are born, automatically renders all men damnable and “without excuse”. To make matters worse, when fallen man uses the evidence of God in creation to uncover this buried truth, he will only add self-righteousness upon his mountain of sin. This leads us to the escalating consequences of humanity suppressing God’s truth.

II. God’s Wrath Implemented

God’s wrath is “revealed”. This is the same word used in verse 17 about God’s righteousness being “revealed” in the gospel, and the same root word for the book of Revelation. The implication with this word is that God has to make His wrath known to a person. Just as God has to open one’s eyes to see His righteous work in the gospel, so also God has to open one’s eyes to see His wrath that comes from heaven.

Notice it is in the present tense that God’s wrath is revealed. His anger against is being revealed right now! It is not simply waiting for the final judgment. Therefore, to those of us who have our eyes opened, Paul points out various degrees to which God now makes His wrath known.

A. Passive - God’s wrath is revealed in what He allows people to do

He allows people to become “futile in their thoughts” and to have their foolish hearts darkened. (v.21) He allows them to become fools. (v.22) Foolishness is itself an expression of God’s wrath. When we see foolish in a person we are seeing the wrath of God incrementally carried out upon that person. Yet this is only the beginning.

B. Active – God’s wrath is revealed in what He does to people

Not only does God allow people to run head long into folly, He also gives them over to “uncleanness”, “vile passions”, and a “debase mind.” Three different times (v.24,26,28b) Paul says that God gave them up to their own ways. Paul is teaching about God’s passive and active reprobation upon sinners. God lifts the restraints from them. Then He gives them over to themselves and condemns them in the life to come. Just as God’s regenerating and renewing grace begins small and continues throughout our life until eternal glory; even so God’s wrath begins small, becomes more evident upon the wicked, and then reaches the full climax on the Day of Judgment.

Paul continues to explain that idolatry and homosexuality are visible manifestations of God’s wrath, especially since they are lifestyles contrary to human nature and against God’s created order. Man was created for the purpose of glorifying
God, yet idolatry ruins that good ending. Man and woman were made for each other, yet immorality ruins that good ending, reaching a depraved apex in homosexuality. This is vitally important to acknowledge in our time, because a homosexual lifestyle does not reflect who a person is, it reflects a sinful choice that a person has made.

It is critical to point out that self-deception is always fundamental to a sinful lifestyle. A person living in any sin, initially and ultimately, will be self-deceived. A person living in homosexuality deceives himself into thinking that his vile passions are simply an expression of who he is. He justifies his desires and lifestyle by regarding his sin as a natural disposition; claiming it was not a matter of choice. Yet sadly, such a person is “filled” (v.29) with a debase mind. And as with all wickedness, self-deception is that favorite shovel used to dig down deep and bury the truth of God even further within the heart of man.

C. God’s wrath inflicts punishment

God’s wrath is not simply revealed by allowing people to go away, and giving them over to that way, but also by inflicting the eternal death penalty upon them. Those who “practice” and “approve” of wickedness will be punished by God’s personal fury and wrath. (v.32) Paul says that the “righteous judgment” of God against all humanity’s wickedness is death. This is why we die physically, and for those apart from Christ, they will die eternally. Interestingly, this word for “righteous judgment” of death is the same word used in 8:4 when Paul speaks of the “righteous judgment” of the Law. But the difference is that, in Christ, the Law pronounces its righteous judgment or verdict of life upon us.

This point jumps too far ahead of ourselves, but it is all to say that God’s gospel saves us from God’s wrath. God ultimately saves us from Himself, by Himself, and for Himself. God’s wrath is the greatest threat and problem for man. We see glimpses of His wrath all around us, even at the feasting of the wicked. Yet in Christ His wrath is satisfied, or propitiated. Our godliness reveals the peace we have with God, while the wickedness of the world reveals the partial wrath they are now suffering.