

There are two reasons Paul was eager to preach the good news about Jesus to the people in Rome, both Christian and non-Christian. We learned about the first one last week: it's because of the beauty of its contents. *In it the righteousness of God is revealed*, he said. The righteous and holy God has made a way for you to be righteous and holy in his sight, and this way is through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior.

But here's the second reason he is eager to preach the gospel. It's because of the desperate situation that people are in without it, namely that *the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men*.

We're going to talk this morning about the wrath of God: what it is, why is it revealed and how it is revealed. And we'll close with how we can avoid it.

And as you may have noticed when we read the text, Paul uses the words "they" and "them" a lot. *God has shown it to them. They are without excuse*. Phrases like that. So here's a temptation we might have as we hear Paul's description of the world: if we're not careful, it can produce an us-them mentality.

- They out there are the bad people, but we in here are the good people.

But that's not Paul's intention at all in this dark description he is about to unfold. It's to make us eager to share the gospel like he is because it's the only power that can save anyone from the wrath of God, ourselves included.

So let's start with the first question:

WHAT IS THE WRATH OF GOD

This concept is introduced in verse 18. *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven...* Now, what is that?

Well, if you get your idea of wrath from movies like *The Wrath of Kahn*, or from other popular media, you might picture it something like this: someone gets wronged or their plans are foiled, so they go on a rampage to inflict suffering and death on everyone responsible. You wronged me, so now I've got the right to do the worst things I can think of to you. That has connotations of unbridled excess and cruelty.

That's not an accurate picture of the wrath of God, because God is just. He doesn't fly off the handle and do something excessive or cruel. *Wrath* is God's righteous and appropriate opposition to all that is evil. It *is* anger, make no mistake about that. But it is righteous anger. It is fair. It is God's revulsion at evil turned into concrete action to address that evil. And far from being a defect in the character of God, it is the very thing which guarantees that there will be justice in the world.

Who could worship a God who would do nothing about the grievous injustices that happen every day in the world? Suppose one of your family members was killed in the Aurora theater shooting, or your infant was shaken by a daycare provider and now lives with brain damage. Could you worship a God who looks at such things and says, “You shouldn’t be bothered by that. That’s just how people are. It’s all good.”

No, we couldn’t worship a God like that, because it’s not all good. There are things that should make us angry. There is evil that requires a response. God’s wrath is that response.

Now, Paul says that the wrath of God *is revealed* from heaven. In other words, you can see it happening now. He doesn’t say it *will be* revealed. He says it *is* revealed. The wrath of God is being revealed as we speak; it is ongoing, every day.

Now, he won’t see how it is being revealed just yet. We’ll come to that a bit later. But it is being revealed. So let’s ask the second question.

WHY IS THE WRATH OF GOD REVEALED?

What is it that provokes God’s wrath? Paul continues: the wrath of God is *revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men*. It is the *ungodliness* and *unrighteousness* of men, of human beings, that rightfully stirs up God’s anger and God’s action.

So, what is that? What falls into the categories of *ungodliness* and *unrighteousness*? Well, these two terms describe basically what it looks like to break the Great Commandment to love God and love your neighbor.

Ungodliness has to do with a lack of reverence for God. You might call it ‘no-God-ness’. It’s living as if there is no God that we answer to. And this is the special emphasis of our passage today. Paul is going to describe this violation of man’s vertical relationship with God.

The second word, *unrighteousness*, emphasizes the horizontal effects of that vertical violation. It is the violations we commit toward one another. We might call that ‘not-right-ness’. There are many things that people do to and with one another that are just not right. And that will be the emphasis of next week’s passage.

Ungodliness and *unrighteousness* are the issues that provoke God’s wrath. God is opposed to man’s violations in our relationship with him, and man’s violations in our relationships with one another. In his justice, he will act against our failure to love God and love our neighbor.

Now, it might be very tempting at this point to think, “OK, I think I can see the justice in that. I’m glad that doesn’t describe me. I’ve never killed anyone, and I am a church going person, and I’ve tried to live a pretty good life. So this wrath of God is for the really bad people, not me.”

But not so fast.

Because Paul says the wrath of God is revealed against *all* ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. Every single thought, word or action that is not consistent with loving God and loving neighbor justifiably deserves God's wrath. It's not just actions but thoughts that can be ungodly and unrighteous.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus addressed this. He said the teachers of the Law will tell you that '*whoever murders will be liable to judgment.*' *But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.*¹ Unrighteousness can be found in our hearts, not just our actions. And everyone is guilty of this. In fact, that's a topic Paul will return to in chapter 2.

So this is what provokes God's wrath; this is why it is revealed. But Paul isn't finished describing this condition of mankind. He now goes into describing what *ungodliness* and *unrighteousness* really look like, beginning with *ungodliness* in our passage today.

And what he has to say about ungodliness is that it is not accidental; it is intentional. It doesn't come from ignorance about God, it comes from a willful refusal to give God his place in our lives. And that refusal produces consequences for our lives. Let's see what he has to say about this. First...

The willing refusal to acknowledge God

In verses 18-19 Paul says that men by their unrighteousness *suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.*

In other words, no one can truthfully say, "I don't know anything about this God you're talking about. How can I be guilty of offending a God that I didn't even know existed?" But Paul says, no actually we do know him. He has shown us his existence. He has made it *plain* to everyone. The problem isn't lack of evidence, the problem is that people *suppress* that evidence. A God that we are accountable to is obvious, but we try to hide that fact.

Now, someone may ask, where is this evidence? I see no evidence? And verse 20 tells us where the evidence is. Paul says that God's *invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.*

So, if you look around at this world, if you look thoughtfully at earth, sky, rain, animals, oceans, human beings, the moon and the stars and far off galaxies, you will *clearly perceive* that there is a God of *eternal power and divine nature* who made all this. And that being our

¹ Matthew 5:21-22

Creator, we therefore are dependent upon him for our existence, and we are accountable to him for what we do with our existence. We know he is there.

Let me give a couple of examples.

I read the biography of Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple. He invited YoYo Ma to come to his home and play cello for him. Yo Yo Ma is a famous virtuoso cellist. He played a piece written by Bach on a 250 year old Stradivarius, probably the best cello in existence. And when he was done, Jobs said this: “You playing is the best argument I’ve ever heard for the existence of God, because I don’t really believe a human alone can do this.”² Jobs never came to faith in that God, but even he had to admit that there is beauty in this world – in this case, music – that can’t be explained just by human effort; that there has to be a God behind it.

Another example of God making himself known *in the things that have been made* is the miracle that life exists on earth. In Eric Metaxas’ book *Miracles*, he has a chapter called “Is Life a Miracle?” He said this. “As of now, fifteen years into the twenty-first century, we know of so many conditions that are absolutely necessary for a planet to support life that not only is it extremely improbable that any other planet can support life, it’s extremely improbable that *our* planet should support life. To speak statistically and logically, life of any kind should not exist and we shouldn’t be here. Our existence is a statistical and scientific virtual impossibility.”³

Now, what evidence does he use to back up that claim? He goes on to say that scientists have identified no less than 150 fine-tuned characteristics about our earth and our galaxy that are all required for life to exist. If even one was off by just a little bit, life would not exist.

One example is the strength of earth’s gravitational field. If it was stronger than it is, toxic gases like methane and ammonia, which have molecular weights of 16 and 17, would remain close to earth’s surface and we would inhale them and die. But if the gravitational field was any weaker, then water vapor, which has a molecular weight of 18 would dissipate into the atmosphere and we would lose our water, and we can’t live without water. So our gravity has to be exactly what it is to have different effects on gases that are within 1 molecular weight apart. And that difference is the difference between life and death.

There are over 150 properties like that which must be exactly what they are or we could not exist: things like the size of the moon, our distance from the sun, the presence of other large planets in our solar system, our location in the Milky Way galaxy and many other factors.

² Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs* (Simon & Schuster, 2011), pg. 425

³ Eric Metaxas, *Miracles* (Dutton, 2014), p. 37

The statistical probability that all 150 properties could be exactly perfect to sustain life on earth is calculated as 1 in 10 to the 73rd power. That's a 1 with 73 zeros after that. In other words, it is a statistical impossibility.

And yet, here we are. Why? Because these things *have been made* by a God of *eternal power and divine nature*. Only an all-powerful being like that can do what is scientifically impossible. God's attributes have been *clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world*. Our consciences are continually confronted by the reality of this God with whom we have to do.

In verse 21 Paul makes it even more clear. He says – *they knew God*, but they *did not honor him as God or give thanks to him*. The trouble with mankind is not that we don't have enough evidence for God. It's that we suppress the evidence that is there. It's not ignorance that makes us guilty; it's a willful refusal to acknowledge and give *honor* and *thanks* to the God who is there and who has made himself known to us.

This is why Paul can say with confidence that anyone who lives and breathes and has the mental capacity to discern the world around them, has no excuse before God. He says at the end of verse 20, *so they are without excuse*. In other words, they have no argument to bring against God revealing his wrath against them. They chose to reject what God made plain to them.

This addresses a question that a lot of people have about those who have never heard about Jesus and the way of salvation. The question is, how can God punish people who never had a chance to hear the gospel message that could save them? How can he condemn the person who lives in the jungle or in a country whose government allows people no access to Christianity?

And the answer is that godlessness is not just about rejecting Jesus; it's about rejecting what God has made known about himself. Not everyone has access to all the truth about God, but we all have access to some truth about God, and it's suppressing *that* truth which makes us guilty. God isn't obligated to show us the way of salvation if we've already rejected what he has shown us about himself. Even those who haven't heard about Jesus are guilty and need to hear about him in order to be saved.

That's why people risk their lives to bring the gospel to places like North Korea or Sudan or Thailand like the Englands. The only way people from every tribe and tongue and nation will be saved is if they hear the gospel. If they didn't need to do that, there would be no reason to go there.

Paul says that mankind is without excuse before God for our *ungodliness and unrighteousness*. We know he's there. And we know we're accountable.

This is actually one of the things that gives hope to telling someone else about the gospel of God. Because unless a person's conscience is hardened beyond remedy, there will be agreement at some level with the starting point that there is a God we are accountable to. And we have the privilege of talking about not only the wrath of God against ungodliness, but also about the love of God that sent Jesus to rescue sinners from his wrath.

The people who shared that news with me the first year and a half before I became a Christian probably thought that this didn't connect with me. But I knew there was a God, and their message about Jesus had the ring of truth. I just kept suppressing it. Until the Lord changed me and won me over from my resistance. He can change you also. He already has for many of you.

So ungodliness comes from a willful refusal acknowledge God in our lives. And that refusal produces consequences. So let's consider....

The consequences of not acknowledging God

We start to see them in verse 21. *Although they knew God... they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.*

So you become something if you choose to suppress the truth about God. Your thinking becomes *futile*. I think the definition of that word is very sobering. It means "incapable of producing any useful result." One translation says "*their thinking became nonsense*" (HCSB).

Now, that may sound like a strong statement, but I think we know what this means. It doesn't mean that every single thought of a person who ignores God is without any value. People with no attachment to Christianity at all write amazing music, produce great technology, and contribute helpful things to society. But it does mean that when it comes to the big questions like Why am I here? and What's wrong with the world? and How can what is wrong with the world be made right?, people make irrational statements and come to conclusions that just don't make sense.

For example, on the issue of morality, deciding what is right and what is wrong, someone might say very strongly, "There is no such thing as absolute truth; everything is relative." But that very statement is a claim to an absolute truth; namely that there is no absolute truth. To be consistent, that person would have to admit that what he just said contradicts itself.

Or someone could say, "There is no right or wrong; everyone can live the way they want." But then that same person will cry for justice if someone steals their car. They can say that there is no wrong way to live, but by their response they prove that they don't really believe that.

What suppressing the truth about God does is lead us to irrational and even self-contradictory ways of thinking about God and about life in God's world.

It's like a person who tells one lie, and then to preserve that lie he has to tell another and another until at some point he no longer can tell the difference between the truth and a lie. It colors your whole worldview and twists it away from reality.

This is what happens when a person *suppresses the truth* about God and refuses to acknowledge him. Thinking becomes *futile*, hearts get darkened. It affects your whole view of everything. You can't live life in a consistent way. You become full of contradictions.

But Paul goes one step further and says *claiming to be wise, they became fools*. What's foolish is to say that your contradictions are wisdom when in reality they make no sense. What's foolish is to claim that there is no God to whom we are dependent and accountable when he is evident all around us.

And Paul doesn't end there. He says what also happens is that it changes the focus of our worship from God to something else. Verse 23 says they... *exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things*. And then again in verse 25, *they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen*.

You see, if you refuse to acknowledge the Creator who has shown himself through what has been made, that doesn't mean you stop worshipping. It just means that you worship something else. You exchange one worship for another. You exchange worship of God for the worship of images, also known as idols.

The fact is we are all born worshippers. To say it another way, every one of us needs something to live for, something that captures our attention, something that gets us up in the morning and which we put our hope in for a meaningful life. What you worship dictates your spending and your schedule; it determines who your friends will be and also your enemies. It's the thing that captures your heart, the thing you think you can't live without.

Paul says everyone has that drive inside them. We will worship something. So you can't suppress the truth about God without turning to something else as your source of hope. You will turn to idols. An idol is anything that replaces God as the object of your allegiance and the source of your life.

So bottom line, if you won't *honor God and give him thanks*, the end result is idolatry. The end result is worshipping the *created things* in this world. That's the consequence. That's the road you have chosen for yourself.

And this is where we come back to the subject of the wrath of God. Because it is on this road toward idolatry where the wrath of God is revealed.

So let's ask the third question.

HOW IS THE WRATH OF GOD REVEALED?

Here's what Paul says in verse 24. *Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.*

The word *therefore* is a link to all that has been said up to this point beginning in verse 18.

Having mentioned earlier that the wrath of God *is revealed* now in an ongoing way, Paul comes back to the way we can see it happening. And that way is this: it's when God gives a person up to their idolatrous pursuits. It's when God says, "Ok, that's the road you want to take? Then I won't stop you. I'll let you find out what happens when you indulge the lusts of your hearts."

Now, if that doesn't sound like a very serious thing to you, maybe some illustrations might help.

An obvious example would be someone who is addicted to meth. It's a highly destructive drug. I've seen billboards that show a woman before and after meth addiction and in just a few years it looked like she had aged 25 years. Teeth missing. Sunken features. Ugly sores. Vacant, faraway look. If someone is hooked on meth it can have such a grip on them that they will use it until they kill themselves with it. They know what it's doing to them but they will do it anyway. So if you have a friend who just had their first experiment with meth, the worst thing you could do for them is let them go headlong into addiction.

But maybe that illustration is too obvious. What about other idols, other passions that capture a person's heart? There are some that don't seem so bad, that people are actually enjoying as they do it more and more. For example the pursuit of success in your career. Surely that isn't a bad thing right? Let me quote how Tim Keller describes the downfall of that. He says,

Take a man who worships his career. He serves it as what will make him "a somebody." It drives him, and it dominates his life – everything else is fitted around it. The worst thing that can happen to him is a promotion! It allows him to continue to think that he can find blessing in his over-desires. It convinces him that this is "real life." It enables him to forget the wreckage he is making of his marriage, his family, his friendships, in order to pursue his god.⁴

In other words, just because you're enjoying something doesn't mean that it isn't destroying your quality of life. It doesn't mean that all is well. I might just be blinding you to reality and hardening your heart toward other people. Like the man in Proverbs chapter 7 who goes to

⁴ Tim Keller, *Romans for You* (Good Book Company, 2014), p. 30

bed with an adulterous woman. The end of his story was this: *as a bird rushes into a snare; he does not know that it will cost him his life.*⁵

When God gives up a person to the lusts of their hearts, the end result is the *dishonoring of your own body*, according to verse 24. It leads to the destruction of what God intended for your life when he made you. If you won't *honor God* then you will end up *dishonoring* yourself. It's self-destruction. It results in spiritual breakdown, and often other kinds of breakdown also – mental, physical and social. There are consequences to letting your idolatry have free reign. And those consequences are how the wrath of God is revealed in the present world.

Now, there is more than that in the wrath of God. There is also wrath of God that will be revealed after this life. And that is even more terrible to consider. But for now, even the wrath that is revealed is enough to sober us about the state of people all around us.

As I said in the beginning, one temptation we might have in hearing all this is to become self-righteous with an us-them mentality. We can have thoughts like, "Isn't it terrible what's going on in the world? I want to stay as far away from that as possible. Can you believe what people do? It's disgusting. I don't want any part of that."

But friends, the reality of that is the very reason God has sent his Son into the world. As John said in John 3:17, *God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* God sent his Son into the world to save people like Paul and like you and me to tell them the way to escape his wrath. And there is a way!

So that's what we'll close with. Our last question is...

HOW DOES ONE ESCAPE THE WRATH OF GOD?

Well, that's what this book of Romans is about. It's about the good news concerning God's Son Jesus. Jesus is the way of escape.

You see what God did by sending his Son into the world was to bear God's wrath in our place. He sent Jesus to take the blame for our ungodliness and unrighteousness. He sent Jesus to become the sin-bearer and the wrath-bearer for us so that we could be saved from wrath and unto eternal life.

When Jesus was in the garden right before the crucifixion, he said, "*Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will*" (Matt. 26:39). What was in the cup? It was the wrath of God. It was the *cup of the wine of wrath* that Jeremiah mentions in Jeremiah 25:15, a cup that all the nations should drink, all who by their

⁵ Proverbs 7:23

unrighteousness suppress the truth about God. But Jesus drinks it instead on behalf of all he came to save.

On the cross, God spent his righteous anger on his sinless Son. As Isaiah 53 says, he was *smitten by God and afflicted* for the wrongs we have done against God and man. The way of escape is to trust that to be true, to trust in Jesus as the one who suffered in your place. Faith in Jesus is the way of escape. *The one who by faith is righteous shall live* (verse 17).

If you trust in Jesus as the wrath-bearer, then 1 Thessalonians 5:9 is God's promise to you. It says *God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ*.

I hope you've taken the way of escape. There's no hope in *suppressing the truth* about God. The hope is in giving him *honor* by acknowledging him and *thanking* him for his goodness, and for Jesus. Real life is found in *exchanging* the lie of our idols with the *truth* of God who made us, and who sent his Son to save us.