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IS GOD'S WRATH JUSTIFIED?

Romans 1:18-23

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August 29, 2010

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Romans, Lesson 6

Is God's Wrath Justified? Romans 1:18-23

Probably the most famous sermon ever preached in America was Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," preached at Enfield, Connecticut, July 8th, 1741. I had a college philosophy professor who ridiculed that sermon and the frantic response that many had to it that day. But, clearly, God used that sermon like He has few others!

To say that the concept of God's wrath is out of sync with our modern world is to state the obvious. Even many who claim to be evangelicals object to and minimize any mention of God's wrath. They may say that they believe it because it's in the Bible, but they're embarrassed by it. I've even heard of professing Christians who say, "I believe in a God of love, not a God of wrath." Sometimes such people ignorantly imply that the God of the Old Testament was a God of wrath, but by the New Testament, He mellowed out to be a nice old guy! I've been told that Jesus was always loving and never judgmental. I always want to ask such people, "When was the last time you actually read the New Testament?"

Modern "seeker" churches have drawn huge crowds by never mentioning sin and judgment, and instead focusing on the more positive aspects of the gospel: "God loves you. He offers you an abundant life full of peace, joy, and love. He will help you with your problems. He wants you to be happy. Won't you invite Him into your heart?"

But there is no mention of a holy God who is justified in His wrath against sinners. We've bought into the old liberal message, which theologian Richard Niebuhr once described (*The Kingdom of God in America*, p. 193, cited by Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* [Image Books, 1975], 2:249), "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross."

When the apostle Paul begins to expound on the gospel that he proclaimed, he does not lead off with the love of God (as we

saw last time), but with the righteousness of God. When he elaborates further, he does not even then mention God's love, but rather, God's wrath. Modern critics would say, "Paul, you're not going to win any converts by that approach! Lighten up! Maybe, much later, you can touch on that subject. But when you're trying to win people to Christ, don't mention God's wrath!"

But Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, leads off with (Rom. 1:18), "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." *For* links this to verses 16 & 17. If we're going to understand why we need God's power in the gospel and why we need His very righteousness imputed to our account, then we need to understand His wrath against our sin. If we're not such bad folks and if we have enough good deeds to earn points towards heaven, then we don't need God's righteousness and Christ did not need to bear God's wrath on our behalf. But if we are ungodly and unrighteous in God's sight, if we have suppressed the truth in unrighteousness, and as a result are under His just wrath, then we desperately need God's saving power through the gospel!

Thus Paul begins a lengthy section (1:18-3:20) in which he sets forth in great detail the sinfulness of the human race. At first, he gives a general indictment, although the sins that he mentions (1:23-32) may be more prevalent among the Gentiles. He moves on (2:1-16) to indict those who think that they are moral enough to commend themselves to God. Then (2:17-3:8), Paul turns on the Jews who pride themselves on having the Law, showing how they are also guilty before God. Finally (3:9-20), he sums it up by showing that the entire human race is justly guilty before God. Only at that point (3:21-26) does he come back and pick up the theme of 1:17, that the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ is available to sinners through faith alone.

In our text, then, Paul is showing why God is justified to inflict His wrath on the sinful human race, which shows why we need the gospel. We can sum up his message in 1:18-23:

God is just in pouring out His wrath on the human race because we have sinfully rejected His revelation of Himself and have worshiped the creature rather than the Creator.

1. God is just in pouring out His wrath on the human race because we have sinfully rejected His revelation of Himself (1:18-20).

Paul argues that God has revealed Himself to the human race, both through His wrath (1:18) and through His creation (1:19-20). But we have inexcusably rejected God's revelation and instead have resorted to inventing gods of our own (1:21-23).

A. God reveals Himself through His wrath against human sin.

There is an obvious parallel and yet contrast between verses 17 & 18. In verse 17, "the righteousness of God is revealed." In verse 18, "the wrath of God is revealed." The phrase, "from heaven" adds weight to the revelation. This isn't just an idea that popped into Paul's mind. This is a revelation from heaven, that is, from God Himself.

When we think about God's wrath, we need to get rid of any human notions of someone with a bad temper who flies off the handle over the slightest provocation. Rather, God's wrath is a part of His holy nature. It is His settled, determined, active opposition to all sin. If God loves righteousness, He also must hate evil. If God were all love and no wrath, then He would not be God at all, because He would be unrighteous. We know this even on a human plane. If a judge was all love and hugs towards cold-blooded murderers or child molesters, he would not be a righteous judge. Even though our anger easily slips from being righteous to unrighteous, we all know that anger is the proper response to certain sins. In the same way, God would not be holy or good if He did not react to evil with wrath and righteous judgment.

We only have time to look at a few of the biblical references to God's wrath. Ignoring the many Old Testament references, the New Testament starts off with the ministry of John the Baptist, who tells his audience (Matt. 3:7), "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" In Matthew 23:33, after pronouncing a series of "woes" on the Pharisees, Jesus thunders, "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?"

In John 3:16, we have the marvelous verse, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever

believes in Him shall have eternal life." Oops! I left out something: "shall not perish"! Years ago, I conducted a funeral where they had printed up the little cards with John 3:16 as I just erroneously quoted it to you! I didn't let it go! To perish means to come under God's eternal wrath. In John 3:36 we read, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

In Ephesians 2:3, Paul says that we all (Jews and Gentiles) were "children of wrath," a Jewish way of saying that we were characterized by being under God's wrath. In Ephesians 5:6, he uses the same Jewish expression to say that "the wrath of God comes on the sons of disobedience" (also, Col. 3:6). In 1 Thessalonians 1:10 he says that Jesus "rescues us from the wrath to come." In 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9, he writes that God will deal "out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction" The entire Book of Revelation shows the many forms of wrath that will be poured out on sinners both before and after Jesus returns.

J. I. Packer (*Knowing God* [IVP], pp. 134-135) said, "One of the most striking things about the Bible is the vigor with which both Testaments emphasize the reality and terror of God's wrath." A. W. Pink (*The Attributes of God* [Baker], p. 82) wrote, "A study of the concordance will show that there are more references in Scripture to the anger, fury, and wrath of God than there are to His love and tenderness." So we cannot shove God's wrath into the closet! R. W. Dale observed (cited by R. C. Sproul, *The Cross of Christ Study Guide* [Ligonier Ministries], p. 35), "It is partly because sin does not provoke our own wrath, that we do not believe that sin provokes the wrath of God."

Later (2:5), Paul acknowledges that a future day of wrath is coming at the final judgment, but here (1:18) he calls attention to the present revelation of God's wrath (the verb means, "is being revealed"). What does he mean? If we look around, we can see God's wrath in all of the effects of the fall, both on creation and on human misery and suffering. We see floods, fires, earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, famine, and disease, which cause untold suffering and death. There are the more direct links between sin and judg-

ment, such as STD's and the AIDS epidemic on the sexually immoral, and the harmful effects of drugs and alcohol on addicts. We see the terrible effects of drunkenness and drug abuse in the home, on our highways, and in society at large. We see the devastating effects of war and terrorism. The list could go on and on.

Also, a glance through past history, both in the Bible and outside of it, shows the ongoing wrath of God. He destroyed the whole world through the flood. He poured out fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah. He punished both Israel and Judah allowing invading armies to kill many and send others into captivity.

But the greatest example of God pouring out His wrath was when He put His own Son on the cross to bear our sins, so that He cried out in agony (Matt. 27:46), "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Jesus' terrible death shows that God cannot just brush our sin aside. His righteous judgment must be satisfied. As Paul argued with the philosophers in Athens (Acts 17:31), the resurrection of Jesus from the dead proves that God "has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness..." Woe to all who have not repented of their sins and trusted in Christ before that day! God reveals Himself through His wrath. Don't miss it!

B. God reveals Himself through His creation.

Paul goes on to show another way that God has revealed Himself, namely, through His creation. Here Paul is referring to God's general revelation in the created universe, not to His special revelation in His written word. Most commentators understand "His invisible attributes" to be a summary term that is further explained by the next two terms, "His eternal power and divine nature." Anyone should be able to look at the vastness of the universe (even in days before there were telescopes!) and conclude, "God is amazingly, incomprehensibly, powerful! You don't have to gaze into outer space—get caught in an exposed area in a thunderstorm and you will appreciate God's power! Marla and I have had some terrifying experiences with that!

God's "divine nature" refers to the sum of His attributes (S. Lewis Johnson, "Paul and the Knowledge of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* [Jan.-March, 1972], p. 69). This does not mean that we can learn as much about God through nature as we can through His Word. But,

even so, men should be able to look at God's creation and conclude many things about His attributes, in addition to His power.

John Calvin sums it up well (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], pp. 71-72), "His eternity appears evident, because he is the maker of all things—his power, because he holds all things in his hand and continues their existence—his wisdom, because he has arranged things in such an exquisite order—his goodness, for there is no other cause than himself, why he created all things, and no other reason, why he should be induced to preserve them—his justice, because in his government he punishes the guilty and defends the innocent—his mercy, because he bears with so much forbearance the perversity of men—and his truth, because he is unchangeable."

It is important to recognize that God's revelation through creation is not enough to save anyone, in that it does not reveal His plan of salvation through Jesus Christ, apart from which no one can be saved (Acts 4:12). But it is enough to condemn everyone. By looking even at their own bodies or at the marvel of a little gnat that can fly, eat, and reproduce, people should bow in worship before God. But they don't. They swat the gnat in annoyance and go on without a thought about the intelligence, power, and wisdom that it took to create a gnat, much less all of creation! They ignore the obvious fact that there is an all-powerful God and go full bore in their selfishness and sin, ignoring the obvious revelation of His wrath in the fact that they will soon die!

Two brief comments before I move on: First, in answer to the question that often comes up, "Will God judge the innocent heathen who has never heard about Jesus?" The answer is, there are no innocent heathen. All have sinned against the light that they have received and all will be judged accordingly (Matt. 11:20-24).

Second, I hope that you can see how utterly absurd and yet how widely destructive to people's eternal destiny the belief in evolution is. It gives sinners a supposed escape from being accountable to God, as some prominent atheists have openly admitted. Although there is more than abundant evidence of an all-powerful Creator, evolutionists cling to the absurd idea that everything came out of nothing. At the root of their belief is not science, but immorality. They suppress the truth in unrighteousness. That leads to:

C. Sinners have inexcusably rejected God's revelation of Himself, suppressing the truth in unrighteousness.

Paul says (1:18) that God's wrath is revealed "against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." Some commentators see these two words, "ungodliness" and "unrighteousness," as being somewhat synonymous, repeated for emphasis. But others say that Paul is using them quite strictly to refer to "lack of reverence for God" ("ungodliness") and "lawlessness or injustice towards our fellow man" ("unrighteousness").

Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Romans: The Gospel of God* [Zondervan], pp. 355-359) argues at length that the terms refer to these two different aspects of sin and that Paul has put them in this order for an important reason: ungodliness is always the root sin and unrighteousness flows from it. Our first and basic problem is that we disregard and disobey God. This leads to our sins against one another. Ungodliness was the first sin, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God. This led to separation from God, which then led to alienation between them and eventually to the sin that caused Cain to murder his brother Abel.

The word "suppress" may mean to hold on to, or to hold down, which is the idea here. It implies that men knew the truth (note that there is such a thing as knowable absolute spiritual truth!), but they want to hold it down so that they can pursue their sins. Whether it is evolution denying God as the Sovereign Creator, or philosophy speculating that we cannot really know God at all, or psychology telling us that we are not responsible for our problems (psychologists don't like the word "sin"!), these are all ways of pushing God away from us so that we can be our own lord. "So that they are without excuse" is probably a purpose clause that means, "Sinners cannot plead ignorance as an excuse" (Johnson, p. 69). God has posted huge warning signs with flashing lights, namely, His ongoing wrath and His magnificent creation. If sinners drive past them over the cliff, they only have themselves to blame.

So, Paul's first point is: God is just in pouring out His wrath on the human race because we have sinfully rejected His revelation of Himself. I can only comment briefly on his second point and its implications:

2. God is just in pouring out His wrath on the human race because we have worshiped the creature rather than the Creator (1:21-23).

Paul makes five points here:

- A. People knew God generally through the revelation of Creation.

Paul seems here to be interpreting human spiritual history in light of the fall (Johnson, p. 72). Verse 21 does not mean that men knew God in a saving way, but rather that they had a general sense that He exists. In *The Institutes* (ed. by John McNeill [Westminster Press], 1:3:1), John Calvin asserts that all people have an awareness of God. He says, "There is no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep-seated conviction that there is a God." As Paul has just shown, God's creation makes His attributes evident within all people, until they suppress it. There is also the universal presence of the conscience (2:15).

- B. People did not glorify God or give thanks.

This is the root sin: Although people know about God, they do not give Him His proper glory and they do not express thanks to Him for His many undeserved blessings. We could easily develop an entire sermon or two here, but let me apply it directly: It's easy to sit here and shake our heads at the heathen, who have no concept of glorifying God or giving thanks. But do I glorify God for His goodness and mercy and grace? Do I give thanks to God for His many blessings that He showers on me every day?

- C. As a result, the foolish hearts of sinners were darkened.

Paul also refers to this in Ephesians 4:18, where he describes "the Gentiles" (pagans) as "darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart." When Paul says, "their foolish heart was darkened," he is referring to their entire inner life, including their intellect, emotions, and will (Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 85). To be in the dark refers to total moral and spiritual blindness. Only God can shine His light into such dark hearts (2 Cor. 4:4-6).

D. As a result of darkened hearts, sinners profess to be wise, but are fools.

Since the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Ps. 111:10), those who do not fear God or bow before Him as God profess to be wise, but are fools (Ps. 14:1). "Fools" does not refer to mental deficiency, but to spiritual and moral deficiency. Turning from the revelation that God has given of Himself in His wrath and in creation, sinners plunge into futile speculation. As a philosophy major at a secular university, I know of no better description of godless university professors than Romans 1:21 and 22. The final result is:

E. This foolishness is exhibited by worshiping the creature rather than the Creator.

Rejecting God does not lead to atheism, but to substituting the glory of the one true God with manmade idols "in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures." Man didn't begin with idolatry and polytheism and work his way up to monotheism. Man began by knowing the one true God, but when he suppresses the truth in unrighteousness, he falls into the supreme foolishness of creature worship (Isa. 44:9-20).

I've seen idolatry of statues and sacred cows in Asia. I've observed people worship the creation here in Flagstaff. But it never ceases to amaze me, as I've said before, that here in a university town, we have a store that has stayed in business for many years by selling nothing but idols! It's as if the idols of self, sex, money, and power were not enough! We've got a store selling just about any conceivable idol that you could see worshiped in India or Nepal or Thailand! Idolatry is really stupid, but, I should add, there is real power in idolatry—but it is demonic power, not God's power.

Conclusion

So, is God just in pouring out His wrath on those who have rejected His revelation of Himself, who turn instead to worship the creature rather than the Creator? When you stand before Him, do you have any chance of winning your case? Only if by faith you stand there covered by the righteousness of Jesus Christ!

Application Questions

1. Does the concept of God's wrath offend or embarrass you? Why? Examine your reasoning and motives.
2. Some have said that things like the AIDS epidemic and other catastrophes cannot be God's judgment because the innocent suffer along with the guilty. Why is this faulty reasoning?
3. There is an organization that purports to be evangelical and yet is dedicated to "theistic evolution." Why is this not a biblical option?
4. Why are "glorifying God" and "giving thanks" such fundamental issues? How can we practice these qualities more faithfully?

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