

The Righteous Wrath of God Against Unrighteousness

Romans 1:18

February 26, 2017

Introduction:

It will be 15 years ago next month that my father died from a sudden heart attack. He was shopping at Toys R Us for a gift for Savannah when he quite literally fell over and died on the spot. There was a nurse there shopping at the same time who was able to aid him as best she could until the ambulance arrived but even though the nearest hospital was less than a mile away, by the time the ambulance arrived he had already passed.

Doctors say there are several symptoms that may indicate the potential for a heart attack: chest pain, shortness of breath, nausea, light headedness. I'm not sure how many of those symptoms my father experienced before he died: my mom called me earlier that week to say she had come home and found him passed out on their living room floor, resulting in the final conversation I had with my dad, insisting that he needed to go to the doctor. But my dad, being my dad, brushed me off and said it was no big deal, nothing to worry about. Had he recognized and taken seriously that the symptoms were an indication of a larger, far more serious problem, he might still be alive today.

I don't think my dad was unique in not recognizing the larger problem he faced. We all tend to minimum symptoms and not realize that sometimes behind them lies a much deeper and more significant issue. And while that is certainly true when it comes to our physical health, it is even more so when it comes to our spiritual health. We all have these symptoms of greed and selfishness, of envy and anger, lust and bitterness, and we try our best to get a handle on them and treat them the best we can. But if we're honest, we don't think of them as being all *that* bad. "Boys will be boys" we say, or "Well, that's just human nature" and shrug our shoulders as if to say, "Whatcha gonna do?"

But behind those symptoms of sin lies a serious problem, a problem far more threatening than a heart attack or cancer or a stroke. The real danger to our spiritual health comes not from within us but from without: our biggest problem is the wrath of God. God's righteous wrath stands against us for our sin and unless that wrath is somehow dealt with, it will come crashing down upon us to our eternal damnation.

The past few weeks I've had the opportunity to preach about many wonderful aspects of the grace of God as revealed in the gospel, but this morning I need to drastically switch gears and talk about God's wrath. As Paul moves now into the main body of his letter to the Romans, he begins by laying out the bad news before he can unpack the good news. But as unpleasant as it may be, it is something we must hear in order to fully understand why the gospel is truly good news.

So, if you haven't already done so, please open your Bibles to Romans 1, which can be located on pg. 939 of the pew Bibles. Our focus today will be on one verse – v. 18 – a verse which sets the tone for much of what Paul has to say over the next three chapters. Please follow along as I read. Paul writes in v. 18, "**For the wrath of God is revealed**

from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.”

As we consider the wrath of God this morning, we're going to do so by answering four questions about God's wrath: first, "What is the wrath of God?" Second, "Where does the wrath of God come from?" The third is, "When is the wrath of God revealed?" And finally, "Why is the wrath of God being revealed?" So, we'll be answering the "What... where... when... and why" of God's wrath. Let's begin then with our first question...

1. What is the wrath of God?

Now before we get to that answer, we need to see how this verse relates to what came before it. Notice how v. 18 begins with the word **"for"**? That means what Paul is about to say is connected to what he said before this. So, let's look back at v. 16 and read our passage in its context. Paul says starting in v. 16, **"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.' For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth."**

The word **"for"** here in v. 18 is acting like the word "because" in that v. 18 is explaining why the righteousness of God received by faith is being revealed. Why do we need the gospel message? Why is God's righteousness through the gospel being revealed? Here's why: because of God's wrath against men's unrighteousness. Our works have only earned us God's wrath whereas the righteousness we need to escape that wrath can only be received by faith. Paul gives the cure in v. 16-17 and then tells us why we need it in v. 18. Paul lays out the problem so we can properly see how the gospel provides for us the only solution.

So, Paul begins his explanation of the gospel with **"the wrath of God."** That's not the way most of us begin our evangelistic endeavors, is it? How often have you started to explain the gospel to your friend by saying, "Well, did you know Mary, that God's wrath is being revealed against you for your ungodliness and unrighteousness"? Probably not too many of us. Often, we start off with something like the first point of the popular gospel track called the "Four Spiritual Laws" which begins, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." Do you see a certain discontinuity between that and what Paul says here? Not that God's love isn't part of the gospel message, but that's not where Paul begins. Before taking about God's love, he talks about God's wrath.

Quick point of application then: if in explaining the gospel, you don't say anything about the wrath of God against sin, then you're misrepresenting the gospel. God doesn't save you because he thought you were a great guy. Your problem isn't that you messed up a bit and God is willing to just look the other way. The gospel is the solution to the real problem you and I and everyone faces and that is that the wrath of God stands against us for our sin. A gospel message that soft-peddles sin and makes no mention of the wrath of God is simply falling short of what the gospel claims to save you from.

But, that being said then, what is “**the wrath of God**”? Wrath is one of those older English words we don’t use very often any more except perhaps in the title of old Star Trek movies. The dictionary defines “wrath” is as “strong, vengeful anger” and as “retributory punishment for an offense or a crime.” So then, we can think about wrath both in terms of feeling and behavior. In terms of feeling, wrath is fierce anger against someone or something. That anger leads to behavior which results in punishment for the individual who was the cause of the anger. In light of this, we can define “**the wrath of God**” as a severe divine anger leading to retributive punishment.

So then, that’s what God’s wrath is, but we need to refine that definition a little bit and to do that we need to answer our second question which is...

2. Where does the wrath of God come from?

Paul goes on to say in v. 18, “**For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven...**” I think Paul is putting a finer point on this by reminding us that the wrath of God comes from heaven and not from earth, which is to say first of all that God’s wrath is not like earthly wrath in terms of what brings about this anger. Frequently our anger is fueled by pride, selfishness, jealousy, and at its worst extreme, can be utterly irrational and completely out of control.

For example, my grandfather was an alcoholic who would go to the bar after work, get drunk, and then come home and in anger beat his wife. My father, as the oldest son, tried his best to intervene but suffered a beating for getting in my grandfather’s way. That was irrational anger. The wrath poured out by my grandfather on his wife and children was not tempered or controlled in any way. Nor was it a righteous or holy anger because it was totally unjustified. It was fueled by alcohol and the sinful pride that ruled his heart. It was an earthly, unrighteous anger that wreaked havoc in my dad’s childhood home.

But the wrath of God is “**from heaven.**” That means it’s a righteous anger. God isn’t a spiteful, vindictive God who wants to get revenge for some personal slight. He’s not driven by some chemical addiction that controls him. He doesn’t have a cruel streak that takes joy in causing pain and suffering. His anger is both controlled and just. His wrath is a holy wrath and he’s rightfully angry over sin. God doesn’t fly off the handle in a reckless raging fury; his anger is tempered by his righteous character.

But second, that the wrath of God comes from heaven indicates it is quantitatively different in terms of its effect. Earthly forms of wrath can of course result in some pretty bad things. You could get beaten, stabbed, imprisoned, or at worse, even killed. But heavenly wrath is a divine wrath and the consequences of experiencing God’s wrath is exponentially worse than anything we could experience on earth. Jesus warned us of this in Matthew 10:28 when he said, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” The wrath of earthly powers can only kill your body at worst; but God can destroy your body and soul in hell. The stakes are much, much higher when it comes to God’s wrath.

Moving on now, the next question we need to consider is the timing of God's wrath. When will it be experienced? So, our third question is...

3. When is the wrath of God revealed?

I think most of us would answer this question by referring to sometime in the future. The Bible repeatedly speaks of the Day of the Lord when all will stand before the throne of God and be judged, with the righteous receiving eternal life while the wicked are cast in hell for all eternity. Perhaps the most terrifying parable Jesus told was the one of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, who stand before God at the final judgment only to discover that what they did to the least of these, they had done unto him. So then, you would be absolutely right to answer this question using the future tense: God will one day in the future reveal his just and righteous judgment against all mankind when Christ returns and judges both the living and the dead.

But did you notice the verb tense Paul used in v. 18? He doesn't say "God's wrath *will be* revealed," does he? What does he say? "**The wrath of God *is* revealed...**" Present tense. Right now, in this moment, the wrath of God is being revealed, it is being made manifest in the world. Does that surprise you? We so often think of God's wrath as something that is yet to come that it can come as a shock here to read that the wrath of God is being revealed in the here and now.

So, what does that mean? How is God's wrath being revealed right now? I think we can discern three ways. First, it is being revealed through the preaching and teaching of God's Word. Scripture reveals to us what God has done throughout history and why he did it. When the Israelites are taken into captivity by the Babylonians, God's Word reveals that it was as punishment for their sin. God's Word tells us why Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, why Achen was punished for taking the forbidden plunder from the city of Ai, why Moses was unable to enter the Promised Land, and so on. God's Word reveals over and over the fact that God hates sin and he will punish it.

Second, the wrath of God is revealed in the cross of Christ. God's wrath towards our sin was such that even when his Son was made to be sin for us, God would not allow it to go unpunished. The cross is God's revelation of how he feels about our sin; that if he would allow his only-begotten Son to suffer and die for sin that he took upon himself on our behalf, then how much more should we be certain that God will not hesitate to punish those who are indeed guilty of sin by their own words and deeds.

The third way God's wrath is being revealed is by how God's gives people over to their sin. This is what Paul seems to have primarily in mind here because a little further into this chapter he's going to explain that because people didn't worship God or give him thanks, God gave them over to their ever-increasing depths of sin. Now I'm not going to steal my own thunder by preaching on those verses at this time, but it's enough to point out that God's wrath is not only a future threat but a present reality. It is being revealed in his Word, revealed by the cross of Christ, and revealed in the growing depths of wickedness of those who reject him.

This then brings us to our fourth question which v. 18 answers and that is...

4. Why is the wrath of God being revealed?

Look back in your Bibles once again at v. 16. **“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.”** To put it succinctly, God’s wrath is against us for our sin. Paul uses a couple of words here to describe our sin: he refers to it first as **“ungodliness”** and second as **“unrighteousness.”** These two terms essentially mean the same thing, although a certain amount of nuance between them can be discerned.

“Ungodliness” carries with it the idea of lacking any reverence or devotion to God. It could be used for those who reject the true God for false gods such as the various idols the Israelites frequently sought after. But it can also refer to those who simply don’t bother with God or any religious devotion at all. Either they reject any notion of God, such as an atheist, or if they give a vague lip service to belief in the existence of God, they don’t live with any real regard to him. I’ve meet plenty of people who say they believe God exists, but he has no effect on their lives. That’s ungodliness – rejecting God whether in what you believe intellectually or how you live practically.

“Unrighteousness” is the moral outworking of ungodliness. It’s the behavior towards others that flows out of us rejecting God and his Word. It includes all the things Paul will list at the end of chapter 1, such as envy, murder, strife, deceit, and so on.

So then, **“ungodliness”** concerns how we relate to God and **“unrighteousness”** concerns how we relate to others. These two terms cover in a nutshell what Jesus said was the summery of the whole Law. Remember how Jesus summed it up? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and second, love your neighbor as yourself. When we fail to love God as we ought, that’s **“ungodliness”** and when we don’t love our neighbor as ourselves, that’s **“unrighteousness.”**

Paul adds one more aspect to the reason for God’s wrath being revealed at the end of v. 16. He says, **“...by their unrighteousness [they] suppress the truth.”** Paul is going to unpack for us that when we look at v. 19-23 next week, but for now it’s enough to say that people put down the truth. It’s available to them, but they refuse to hear it. It’s as the apostle John said in John 3:19, “Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light.” The light of truth is suppressed because people loved the darkness of their sin and so they refused to see it.

So, that then answers our four questions about the wrath of God: what is it, where does it come from, when is the wrath of God being revealed, and why. But while we’ve done our work to grasp what this passage teaches on an intellectual level, we haven’t truly understood this verse until the seriousness of it grips our hearts. This isn’t a history lesson. This is not a little story for our entertainment. It’s not a bit of trivia or some fascinating fact we can use to win at Trivial Pursuit. It is the most serious threat that you and I and everyone else faces. So then, I have a fifth question for us, and it’s the last and most important question we need to answer this morning, and it is this...

5. How should the revelation of God's wrath affect me?

I started this message talking about how my father died of a heart attack, not realizing the symptoms he had experienced were signs of a far more serious problem. The arteries of his heart were nearly 100% blocked and if he didn't do something about it soon, it would kill him. So it is for us and our sin. See, our real problem isn't that we are greedy. It's not that we're selfish or give into lust and pride. It's not that we like to gossip and slander others. Even cheating and stealing and injuring others, even to the point of murder - while serious matters to be sure - they aren't the real concern we should have. After all, if at death we return to dust and there is no heaven, no hell, no God, nothing but the cold dark void of eternal nothingness after we die, then what all our sin amounts to is much to do about nothing. The liar and the honest man both end up the same place. Mother Theresa and Adolph Hitler meet the same end either way.

No, the real problem we face is not our sin but the God who threatens to punish our sin. God and his holy wrath is our problem. Everything else is just a symptom of the single greatest threat every human being faces: the wrath of God has been revealed against all our ungodliness and unrighteousness. Because of your sin, God's wrath stands against you. It is upon you already and it will be unleashed in its full fury once you die as you stand before him in judgment. The wrath of God is not something to fear later; it is a reality right now for everyone who has not accepted Christ in faith.

Consider for a moment what a couple of other passages in Scripture say about our current condition in relationship to God's wrath. In John 3:36, Jesus said this, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him." Notice that ending? The wrath of God *remains* on him. Present tense. Reject Jesus, live a life of sin and rebellion against God and God's "remains" on you. It's a present reality right now.

Or consider what Paul says in Ephesians 2. After describing people as being dead in their trespasses and sins, given over to obeying the craving of our sinful flesh, Paul says in Ephesians 2:3, "We were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." Same idea as our passage here in Romans 1:18, but even more graphic. In our very nature - at the very core of who we are - Paul says we are "children of wrath." Apart from Christ, we are not loved by God. Apart from Christ we are not all God's children. Apart from Christ we are not good people whom God appreciates our efforts at trying to be good and is sadly disappointed when we fail.

Listen, the Hallmark greeting card version of God that loves everyone no matter what we do and treats us like a cosmic genie who grants our every wish and only wants to make up feel happy and self-fulfilled doesn't exist. It's a false idol of our own cultural making that has absolutely no relationship to the God of Scripture who has revealed himself to stand in angry wrath against sinners. There is no threat more threatening to us than the wrath of God which right now, in this very moment, hangs over sinners like the sword of Damocles ready to fall.

Listen for a moment what Paul says a little later about God's wrath against our sin in Romans 2:5. He says, "But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed." Like a dam holding back water, more and more of God's anger towards you for sin is building up. The level rises ever higher each passing moment, and though you may experience a few trickles of God's holy wrath in this life, a day is coming when the dam will finally burst and the wrath of God will flood upon you in all of its' relentless, raging, furious power.

And you don't know when the dam of God's wrath will finally break. The day of your death may come sooner than you think. The only reason it isn't right now, at this moment, is because God hasn't allowed it. You live only because God has graciously chosen to give you mercy in this moment. But that could change at any moment.

Perhaps this dread of doom we ought to feel in recognizing how the wrath of God is against us has never been more effectively put than in the words of Jonathan Edward's most famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Allow me to quote him at length in order to drive this point home for us as effectively as possible. He writes,

"The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked. His wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire. He is of purer eyes than to bear you in his sight; you are ten thousand times as abominable in his eyes as the most hateful, venomous serpent is in ours.

You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince, and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else that you did not go to hell the last night; that you were suffered to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell since you have sat here in the house of God provoking his pure eye by your sinful, wicked manner of attending his solemn worship. Yes, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell.

O sinner! consider the fearful danger you are in! It is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath that you are held over in the hand of that God whose wrath is provoked... as much against you as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of Divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it and burn it asunder...

It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity. There will be no end to this

exquisite, horrible misery. When you look forward, you shall see along forever a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul. And you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all. You will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages in wrestling with this Almighty, merciless vengeance. And then when you have so done, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but [the smallest dot] to what remains. So that your punishment will indeed be infinite.”

My friends, this is the stark reality of what our situation is apart from Christ. There is no problem that any man, woman, or child faces worse than the reality of God’s wrath being stored up against him. And until you stare hard into the face of God’s righteous anger and understand what you face should his wrath not be appeased, you will never comprehend why the gospel is such good news. You need to face the bad news, the terrifying news of God’s wrath revealed against your sin, before you will ever see the need to believe the good news of Christ’s atoning death and resurrection.

Conclusion

So then, let me conclude by addressing two groups of people. First, for those of you who have trusted in Christ for your salvation, who have believed Jesus’ death on the cross satisfied the wrath of God against your sin, there is nothing to fear this morning. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because God’s wrath was poured out on Christ in your place. Instead, there should be joyful thankfulness in your heart that you no longer need to fear God’s wrath, neither now nor in the future.

But if you aren’t a Christian, if you haven’t repented of your sins and turned to Christ in faith, then be afraid. Be very afraid. God’s wrath stands against you. There is no problem in your life more pressing that you need to resolve than the wrath of God which is already against you and will be unleashed in all its fury upon your death, which could come at any moment. You are not guaranteed tomorrow, much less the next hour. My father did not expect that when he walked into Toys R’ Us that morning 15 years ago that he wouldn’t leave the building alive. And neither do you have any guarantee you will arrive safely home after this service concludes. God’s patient kindness that has for so long tolerated your wicked rebellion against him may end abruptly, unleashing the full fury of his wrath that will find you cast into the eternal fires of hell that will never cease.

But while you still draw breath, God offers you an escape. He offers to forgive your sin, to restore your relationship with him, and remove the wrath that now stands against you. God so loved the world that he gave his Son, the Lord Jesus, as a sacrificial Lamb to die in our place. On the cross, God counted our sins as if they were Christ’s, even though Jesus himself had never sinned. Jesus suffered the holy wrath of God for our sins so we wouldn’t have to. But to receive the benefits of the cross, we need to turn from our sins and place our trust in Christ. Faith is believing in God’s promises that he took our sins upon himself so that we are forgiven of sin’s penalty and freed from sin’s power. It means we stop relying on our own goodness and trust fully in the perfect obedience of Christ on our behalf.

I'm going to close us in a prayer in a moment, and if you fear the wrath of God, and you should if you're not a Christian, then today is the day to deal with the most significant and serious problem you face. God's wrath is against you for your sin, but Christ has suffered in your place, satisfying God's righteous wrath for all who believe. You only need to come to him humbly, confessing your sin and believing that Jesus, suffered, died, and rose again to take the punishment you deserve so that you can be forgiven and have, not eternal death in hell, but rather the joy of eternal life.

Please bow your heads in prayer with me. Let's pray.