

EXPOSITION OF ROMANS
"The Wrath of God Revealed"
Romans 1:18-25

Mililani Community Church
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This morning we come to the first major section of the book of Romans. In vv. 16-17 Paul has presented the theme of the book: READ. "Not ashamed of the gospel . . . in it a righteousness from God is revealed." But until man knows he is a sinner, he cannot appreciate the gracious salvation God offers in Christ. So Paul had to begin with the unrighteousness of man. His purpose in 1:18-3:20 is to prove that all men are sinners and need Jesus Christ.

Just as we go to a doctor only when we admit that we are sick and cannot cure ourselves--so we will go to Christ only when we admit we are guilty sinners and cannot save ourselves. So Paul is trying to bring us to accept God's diagnosis of our condition in his sight.

The scene is a courtroom. Romans 1:18 is the door that leads us into this courtroom, where God is the presiding judge. The attorney for the prosecution is Paul. The case being tried concerns the condition of man in the sight of God. The defendants are every member of the human race. What's the charge? All men and women are equally sinful, guilty and without excuse before God. Paul's purpose here is to draw up the indictment that all Jews and Gentiles alike are under sin. READ Romans 3:9 (cf. Psa 14).

In a sense we are the jury. Let's examine the evidence together. The first man Paul brings before God is the heathen man, the pagan man. He does not have a knowledge of the Bible, but he has a knowledge of the truth about God from his conscience and from the created universe, and he is without excuse before God. Our culture today reflects a society largely made up of people without knowledge of the Bible. This generation has been called the post-Christian age. So these verses are very important in understanding how to relate the gospel to our generation. VERSE18: "For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness."

We see here first of all . . .
The Revelation of God's Wrath (18)

God is a God of wrath. I told a friend of mine who is an unbeliever, that God is a God of wrath and he literally went into an uncontrollable rage--insisting that God is not a God of wrath--because anger is something that comes from a gland in our brains. He had a healthy gland apparently. But the Bible assures us that God IS a God of wrath. We need to understand exactly what God's wrath means.

There are two basic words in the Greek language used to express anger. One word is thumos--from which we get our word "thermometer." It refers to an impulsive, uncontrollable, outburst of anger. It is a red-hot anger that causes people to explode with rage, like a pot boiling over on the stove. But that is not the meaning of the word used here for the wrath of God. The word here is orge, which refers not to a sudden, impulsive, emotional outburst, but to a settled and abiding condition. In this context it refers to "the reaction of God's holy, righteous nature to sin." God has a deep personal and abiding hatred for sin. He refuses to condone sin or come to terms with it. He is determined to judge it. So God's wrath is his "holy hostility to all that is evil."

In Romans 2:5, Paul writes, "Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgement will be revealed." A Day of wrath is coming. But God's wrath is not only being stored up for a final great outpouring at the last day---the wrath of God is being revealed right now. VERSE 18: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness."

How is God's wrath being revealed now? Not in the gospel. The gospel reveals the righteousness of God, the grace of God. The wrath of God is being revealed now in human experience. When a person or a society or a nation abandons God and begins to live a life of godlessness and wickedness, God in His wrath judicially begins to abandon them. Beginning in verse 24 Paul describes the process of the infliction of God's wrath upon a society or an individual: He gives them over first to SINFUL DESIRES (24); then to SHAMEFUL LUSTS (26); and finally to A DEPRAVED MIND (28f). The perversion and depravity and the misery of a society or a nation that turns its back on God is a revelation of God's wrath. As we will see next week, the condition of our nation today is the verifying data of the revelation of God's wrath.

The word "godlessness" means here "a direct disregard for God." God's wrath is revealed from heaven against all direct disregard for Him. The word "wickedness" basically means wickedness in conduct. So godlessness is basically in the mind, and wickedness is basically in the actions.

Next we see...

THE REASONS FOR GOD'S WRATH

We see the FIRST SPECIFIC REASON FOR THE WRATH OF GOD when we read the last part of v. 18: "who SUPPRESS the truth by their wickedness."

Men have suppressed the truth (18-20)

This suppression of the truth is not passive. The word carries the idea of intentionally holding something down. Like the little boy who smuggled his dog into his room to spend the night. When he heard his parents coming, he put the dog in his toy box and sat on the lid, then tried to talk to his parents while ignoring the repeated thumps of his little pet inside the box. The idea of suppression here is "continual and aggressive striving against the truth." Paul is saying here that all men without Christ are in the constant process of holding down the truth and therefore are the objects of God's wrath. There are no exceptions!

What is the truth they suppress? Verses 19-20 tell us. READ. It's the knowledge of God. That He is and that He is all-powerful. Nature reveals "God's invisible qualities," which are "His eternal power and divine nature." From the universe around him man can see with the eye of reason, that there is a God and that He is all-powerful! Psalm 19:1-3. READ.

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead says this: "If I walk into my children's nursery and find the letters of the alphabet scattered on the carpet, the formation of even the smallest word is an indication that some mind has been at work with those letters." Then he said, "In the universe I find words. Some events seem as meaningless as the letters dropped on the nursery room floor. But even I as a child can read some of the words from the universe."

In other words, what Paul is saying is that as a man looks out, he can see that behind all of this, there must be an intellect or a person, a great being behind the design and order that we see.

A friend of mine in Dallas, recently sent me an article by a professor of biochemistry, Dr. Michael Behe, entitled "Darwin Under The Microscope." Dr. Behe came to believe in the intelligent design of the universe by studying the cell. "Darwin's theory encounters its greatest difficulties when it comes to explaining the development of the cell. Many cellular systems are what I term "irreducibly complex." That means the system needs several components before it can work properly. An everyday example of irreducible complexity is a mousetrap, built of several pieces (platform, hammer, spring and so on). . . . You can't catch a mouse with just the platform and then catch a few more by adding the spring. All the pieces have to be in place before you catch any mice. Whenever we see interactive systems (such as a mousetrap) in the everyday world, we assume that they are the products of intelligent activity. We should extend that reasoning to cellular systems. We know of no other mechanism, including Darwin's, which produces such complexity. Only intelligence does. Intelligent design may mean that the ultimate explanation for life is beyond scientific explanation. If that is true I would not be troubled. I don't want the best scientific explanation for the origins of life; I want the correct explanation."

The order and design in the universe leave us with no excuse for being atheists. God has revealed himself sufficiently in nature so that men and women are at least aware that God exists and that they should worship Him. The universe that surrounds us is God's kindergarten---the ABCs of God---that He is, and that He is all-powerful

Since the creation of the world, there never was a time when God did not reveal himself. Ever since the world was created God has revealed himself through his creation. "Clearly seen" through the reason. Men are able to reason it through and conclude that God exists and that He is all-powerful, "being understood through what has been made." In other words, man can grasp enough of God's nature to prevent him from the error of identifying any of the created things with the Creator. There is no excuse for being an atheist.

As a result God says, "They are without excuse." On judgement day God will not have omitted anything that will cause any man to be able to say, "I didn't know."

Many people ask the question: "Are the heathen lost?" Let me give you some points on how to deal with the question "What about the heathen?"

First of all we need to realize that we don't have all the answers. Deut. 29: 29 says, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever." We don't have the full and complete answer to the question about those who have never heard the gospel.

Secondly, God is just. Psalm 98:9 says that God "will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity. Isaiah 11:3-4 says, "He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. . .with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist."

God is love. II Peter 3:9 says, ". . .He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." I Timothy 2:4 says, "God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."

God has manifested himself in our conscience and in the universe around. He has made it clear that He exists and that He is all-powerful. God uses the witness of our conscience and the witness of the universe around us to bring every man in the world to God-consciousness. When a man comes to God-consciousness, he does not have enough knowledge to be saved. But he does know that God is and that He is all powerful and that man is held accountable to him to worship Him. If that person who has come to God-consciousness desires to know more, I believe God will move heaven and earth to make sure that he learns more. If he does not desire to know more, then he will die without ever hearing more. So God consciousness is a crucial time.

Every man has been given evidence or light that he needs a relationship with God. He knows that God exists and that He is all-powerful and that we must worship Him.

But the problem is that in verse 18 Paul says man suppresses this truth. Basically he just does not want to be held responsible to God.

This leads us to the second reason for God's wrath. . .

First, men have suppressed the truth about God.

Second, men have perverted the truth (v. 21-23)

"For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds, and animals and reptiles."

It is not that they were ignorant about God. They knew Him, but they freely and deliberately refused to give Him the honor and thanks He deserves. Rather than submit their wills to Him, they turned away from Him in disobedience.

There are two Greek words for "know." The word "know" in verse 21 is the Greek word ginosko which means "to know about." The word oida means "to know personally." They knew about God but they did not honor Him or give thanks to Him. Every time we give thanks for our food, we are honoring God for who He is as the creator of all good things. Where there is honor there will be thanks. Where there is no honor there will be no thanks.

Verses 21-23 describe the seven stages of Gentile world apostasy. The seven steps by which the pagan world of Paul's day descended from the knowledge of the true God to the most degraded idolatry:

The world had received the knowledge of God, AND YET. . . .

- They did not glorify him as God. That is, they did not give God His rightful place as the undisputed sovereign.
- Nor did they give thanks to Him. They took his blessings for granted as their rightful due.
- Their thinking became futile. Futile thinking refers to foolish, empty, conceited reasonings. They created rationalizations in a "futile" attempt to justify their immoral choices.
- Their foolish hearts were darkened. Paul says in Ephesians 4:18: "They (the unsaved) are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts."
- They claimed to be wise. The word "wise" is sophoi, from which we get the words sophisticated, philosophy, philosopher, and philosophical. When they refused to accept God's revelation, their hearts became darkened and they became philosophers. This is what those who have rejected the truth about God imagine themselves to have become. They think they are very intelligent and sophisticated individuals.

- They became fools. Psalm 14: "The fool has said in his heart, there is no God." The Greek word is moros, from which we get our word moron. They became spiritual morons.
- They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles." First they worshipped the image of a man, second birds, then quadrupeds and finally crawling creatures. You can't get any lower than this. From worshipping God to worshipping worms.

There is a very important word in this last verse which helps us understand the nature of non-biblical religions and the human psychology that has produced them. The word "exchanged." It occurs here and two verses further down in verse 25: "The exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator--who is forever praised. Amen."

This word explains why the human race has been so determined to invent religions to replace worship of the one true God. The fact that people are religious does not prove that we are all seeking God. It proves just the opposite. It proves that they are running away from God. Although they are not willing to know God and do not want him, they are still unable to do without him and so they try to fill the void with their own substitute gods.

This applies to philosophy as well as religion: Ravi Zacharias in his book Can Man Live Without God says, "Upon close scrutiny, it soon becomes obvious that, while emotionally charged outbursts against the existence of God come garbed in intellectual terminology, what one really finds is an agenda and "reason" that lurks behind the outwardly academic assault. The agenda is unblushingly admitted by a few. Aldous Huxley was one of them." In his book Ends and Means, Aldous Huxley said: "I proposed that there is no God and there are no absolutes so that I could have freedom in two areas: sex and politics. . . .I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; consequently I assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption." Josh MacDowell once said that in sharing Christ with unbelievers, he has met thousands of people with intellectual excuses, but very few with intellectual problems. Their intellectual excuses are just smoke screens for a moral problem. This is what Jesus meant when he said in John 3:19-20: "This is the condemnation, that light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil."

Next week I want to share with you what is probably one of the most relevant things from the book of Romans as we look at the world and at what is happening in our nation today. Man suppresses the truth of God and goes his own way. But it's not that easy. God begins to actively abandon those who refuse to acknowledge and obey the truth. This act of God is one of wrath and judgement and at the same time also one of mercy. His desire is for "all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. 2:4). When God punishes people by making their lives miserable, his purpose is that they might repent and be saved. If they choose not to change, they will remain on the path to hell.

Have you been suppressing the truth? Then stop it. Instead, submit to it by trusting in Christ alone for the forgiveness of your sin.

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