

**“The Wrath of God”**  
**Romans 1:18-32**  
**October 2, 2022**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Paul has announced his theme in the verses just prior to this morning’s text. The theme of this letter to the Romans is the good news that by the power of God there is the possibility of salvation not only for Jews, but for Gentiles as well (v. 16). Further, this salvation comes only by faith and not by works (v. 17). Why, then, does Paul begin to unpack this good news by talking about God’s wrath? Is this a case of bait and switch?

The first word of verse 18 is important, the little word “for.” That word indicates that Paul is about to give a reason for his statement about good news. In other words, the first thing we need to see about the good news is some bad news. It is not unlike a person with a mysterious and debilitating disease, where the first step toward healing is to identify the disease. Paul begins doing that in verse 18 and will continue doing so for the better part of two chapters. He makes the case that something is dreadfully and fatally wrong with the human race. If it is to be corrected, the first step is to know what’s wrong. Accurate diagnosis is necessary not only to lead us to the correct remedy, but also to protect us from false remedies. There is an abundance of such false remedies in our day, for the simple reason that there is an abundance of false diagnoses. Some think the primary human problem is low self-esteem, and their remedy is to affirm and never correct. Others think the remedy is to remove all limits to self-expression. We could take up the entire time allotted for the sermon to talk about false diagnoses and false remedies, but let’s turn instead to what God says about our primary problem. According to verse 18, our problem is ungodliness that leads to unrighteousness, and the resulting wrath of God. Let’s look at this more closely.

**I. The Cause of God’s Wrath – v. 18-23**

The idea of a wrathful God is not popular today. But it needs to be said that the dislike of something doesn’t make it disappear. Paul states here that the wrath of God is very real and very present. It is not just something that will happen on a future Judgment Day, but something that is happening right now. Note the present tense of Paul’s language. God’s wrath *is* revealed. And what is it that brings about this wrath? It is ungodliness and unrighteousness. Ungodliness speaks of a wrong attitude toward God, while unrighteousness has in view primarily the unjust treatment of people.

The first domino to fall, and the root of all wrongdoing, is expressed by this word “ungodliness.” It refers to a wrong relationship with God that arises through suppressing the truth about God. Paul speaks of that in verse 19 when he talks about what is called “general revelation.” That’s a term that refers to what can be known about God from creation itself, as opposed to “special revelation,” which refers to God’s revelation to us through the Bible. An honest view of creation should lead a person to conclude that its Maker is both divine and powerful. Paul says it like this: **“For his 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”** (v. 20).

There is sufficient evidence in creation to conclude that there is a God who should be shown honor and gratitude (v. 21). But humanity’s ungodliness is seen in the fact that such honor and gratitude is not forthcoming. Consider, for example, the creation of the human body. Bill Bryson has authored a book simply called *The Body*. He explains the marvel of such parts as the brain, the bones, the hand, and the tongue. “Your brain...is designed to help you in every way it can.” He goes on to quote those who describe the body as “the best technology that exists on Earth.” Though he acknowledges the exquisite design of the human body, he denies any personal Designer, attributing it all to evolution.

One of the dangers we encounter as we read a passage such as this one is to read it with complete certainty that it applies only to others. To do so is to misread this passage, because Paul is seeking to take us to the conclusion of 3:10: **“None is righteous, no, not one.”** So we need to apply this by asking if there is any tendency in our hearts to suppress the truth about God. In his book on the topic of sin, Cornelius Plantinga challenges us on this.

If we are intellectuals, God is a cosmic Phi Beta Kappa; if we are laborers, God is a union organizer (remember, his Son was a carpenter); if we are entrepreneurs, God is for free enterprise (didn’t his Son say, ‘I must be about my father’s *business*?’); if we are poor, God is a revolutionary; if we are propertied, God is nightwatchman over our goods. The gods of the Persians always look like Persians. ‘Unbelief is not the only way of suppressing the truth about God,’ says Westphal. ‘It is only the most honest.’”

Whenever we suppress the truth about God, bad things happen to us. Let me point out two of them that Paul mentions. The first is foolishness, which he mentions twice in these verses. **“Their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools”** (v. 21-22). I believe it was Luther who spoke of “the moral arc of the universe.” He meant that, in time, sinful behavior leads to chaos and misery, while righteous behavior ultimately leads to fulfillment. A wise person knows that and acts accordingly, while a foolish person plunges headlong into self-destructive behavior. That is the nature of

sin. It is both wrong and dumb. It is like off-key singers who want to sing solos so people will be impressed with them. But instead of becoming the objects of adulation, they become the objects of pity. It is like the porn addict seeking sexual satisfaction through a computer screen, while that very act severely reduces his likelihood of experiencing true sexual satisfaction with his wife.

The height of foolishness is what Paul mentions next. They **“exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things”** (v. 23). He’s describing idolatry, the attempt to fill the God-void in our lives with anything other than the true God. Such is our animosity toward God that we settle for anything other than God, no matter how inept the false god may be. Notice the downward trajectory of the idols mentioned in this verse. It starts with the highest of God’s creatures, his human image bearers. Then he names birds, whose habitat is in the skies, then animals that walk on the earth, and finally reptiles who crawl in the dust. Each one is getting further from the true God.

## **II. The Expression of God’s Wrath – v. 24-32**

God’s wrath is both present and future, and this passage is speaking of the present expression of God’s wrath. There will also be a future expression of that wrath on the great Day of Judgment when Jesus returns. That future judgment is simply an extension of the present judgment announced here. The present expression of God’s wrath is indicated by a phrase that is repeated three times, the phrase **“God gave them up”** (v. 24, 26, 28). Future judgment—hell in other words—is simply that place where God gives people what they want. They have wanted a life without God, and he gives it to them. So when it says here that God gave them up, it doesn’t mean that God gave up on them, but that God gave them what they wanted. The brokenness and fallenness of human nature is seen in the fact that we want the wrong things. The word “lust” in verse 24 simply means a strong desire. But it is an impure desire leading to the dishonoring of our bodies. God has created us as body, soul and spirit, and his intention is that our bodies are to be honored, along with the rest of us. But the corruption of our soul and spirit leads us to dishonor our bodies. Again, he locates the source of this in ungodliness, in the fact that we have **“exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator”** (v. 25).

Verses 26-28 contain one of three references to homosexuality in the New Testament. Part of God’s judgment is to give people up to unnatural desires, and homosexuality is mentioned as an example of that. Note that this passage doesn’t speak of judgment *for* homosexuality, but rather states that homosexuality is God’s judgment. Because this is such a relevant topic, we need to spend a little time on it. Our desire is to be biblical in our view of this,

and I see two ways people fall short of that. One way is the error of our culture, and the other an error in the Church.

The cultural error regarding homosexuality is to normalize it, to say that it is a legitimate expression of human sexuality. The case is made for this by saying that same-sex desires are not fundamentally different from heterosexual desires. Sex is pleasurable, and such pleasure should not be denied to anyone, regardless of their sexual preferences. The case is basically one that views happiness as our ultimate goal, with the assumption that each person is free to pursue that happiness in any way they choose, as long as it doesn't bring harm to others. There are at least two problems with this view. First, it fails to recognize that humans are notoriously poor at assessing what brings happiness in the long run. We simply don't know enough to determine that. We are like children who conclude that eating a diet of candy, cookies and ice-cream will bring them the greatest pleasure. In the moment, it may do precisely that, but in the long term will bring harm. Second, the evidence is accumulating that our culture's obsession with sexual pleasure outside the boundaries of God's law is actually leading to less sex, not more. God's boundaries for sexuality are both clear and simple. Sex is reserved for the loving relationship between a man and a woman in a covenant marriage.

The church error regarding the sin of homosexuality is to single it out as different in fundamental ways than other sins. It is viewed as more severe and evil, for example, than heterosexual sins. Those making this claim point to the fact that homosexuality is called an "abomination" in the Old Testament. But it should be mentioned that other sins are also referred to by that term. Such sins as coveting (Dt. 7:25), idolatry (Dt. 13:14), being devious (Prov. 3:32), haughty eyes and a lying tongue (Prov. 6:16-17), being a lover of money (Lk. 16:14-15), and many other sins are also said to be an abomination to the Lord. There are those in our denomination who want to make the case that someone who experiences same-sex desires is disqualified from serving as an officer of the church, even if he has remained sexually pure and even if he acknowledges his desires as arising from his sinful nature and repents of them and fights them successfully every day. And yet these same people would not say the same about those who battle other sins. It should also be pointed out that in the three times the sin of homosexuality is mentioned in the New Testament, it always appears in a list with other sins, such as our passage here.

Why does Paul refer to homosexuality as unnatural? Doesn't that indicate that this sin should be put in a category by itself? When he says that it is unnatural, he is making the obvious point that human body parts fit together more naturally for heterosexual intimacy, and that procreation is possible only through heterosexual relations. The reason he mentions homosexuality first and points out its unnatural quality is that our ungodliness is just as unnatural. When we worship creation instead of the Creator, we have exchanged the natural for the unnatural.

For those who read Romans 1 to make the case that homosexuality is worse than all other sins, a warning is in order. The warning is to guard your heart against the tendency we all have to focus on the sins of others in order to feel better about your own sin. We all struggle with that, and that's why we need to read all of Romans 1. Twenty-one sins are mentioned after homosexuality. If same-sex attraction is not the temptation you battle, you should derive no comfort from that. There are sins mentioned in the list that catch us all. For example, consider the sin of envy (v. 29), a sin that leads us to rejoice in a setback that may be experienced by someone we would regard as a rival. Envy was the sin that led to the first murder in the Bible, when Cain slew his brother, Abel. It was out of envy that King Saul sought to kill David, because David proved to be a more effective warrior than Saul. It was envy that led King Herod to seek to kill Jesus when he was but a baby, and envy that led the Jewish leaders to insist on Jesus' crucifixion. The purpose of this passage is not that we might read it to find a sin with which we don't struggle, and then to use that sin to feel better about ourselves. The purpose is that we might all come to see, as our membership vow states, that our sin is so deep that we are without hope except through God's mercy.

## **CONCLUSION:**

I want to return to the question of how this might be the good news that Paul claims it to be. To do that is to anticipate where Paul will take his argument. For now, I want to point out the word "all" in verse 18. **"The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men."** When Jesus was crucified, the Bible teaches us that he was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament sacrifices. In those sacrifices, an innocent animal would have the sins of the people transferred to it, after which it would be sacrificed. When Jesus had sin placed on him, no exception was made because he was God's beloved son. The Bible says that "all" ungodliness is judged by God's wrath, and even Jesus experienced that. But he did so as our substitute.

The application is to acknowledge yourself a sinner as part of the good news of the gospel. There is no good news apart from that. If you battle same-sex attraction, don't let that sin keep you from the good news that Jesus has paid for that sin and now empowers you to live a new life. If you have used the sins of others to feel better about your own guilty conscience, ask God to show you your own sin. This is children's Sunday, and it is no accident that God had this passage for us on this day. Our children are growing up in a sin-denying culture. But we resist that because we want this good news to be for them. We want them to learn that they are greater sinners than they know, but also far more loved than they ever might hope. May God help us all to know that!

**Discussion Questions**  
**Romans 1:18-32**

1. What's wrong with the world? Paul says that it is humanity's sinful rebellion against God. What are some alternative answers to that question, particularly ones that are present in our culture, and how do those answers lead to a dead end?
2. Part of the way sin works in our lives is that we all tend to resist the honest confession of our own sin. How do you tend to resist that?
3. The phrase that is mentioned three times in this passage, that "God gave them up," means that God gave them what they wanted. It is said that this is the expression of God's wrath. How is giving people what they want an expression of God's wrath?
4. Are there ways that God has not given you what you want, and you came to see later that this was a mercy from God?
5. What do you think the Bible says should be the Christian's attitude toward homosexuality, especially in light of how it has grown more prevalent and more normalized in our culture?
6. How would you counsel a Christian friend who admits to you that they struggle with same-sex attraction?
7. There are 21 other sins mentioned in verses 29-31, and a majority of them are sins of the tongue. Why does the Bible give such emphasis to sins of the tongue? Are there sins of the tongue that you find yourself more prone to than others?
8. The final verse of the chapter makes the distinction between doing these sins and giving approval to those who practice them. What harm might come from giving such approval? Can you think of examples?