

Covenant Life College - Paul's Letter to the Romans – Feb. 17, 2008

Session 3 - God's Wrath and the Guilt of Mankind - Romans 1.18-3.20

This section of the letter is a stinging indictment of the entire human race. All are under sin and are therefore under the wrath of God.

1. **Romans 1.18-3.20**—This section can be divided into three parts
 - a. Gentiles 1.9-32
 - b. Outwardly “moral” hypocrites 2.1-16
 - c. Jews 2.17-3.8
 - d. Testimony of the OT Scriptures 3.9-20

2. The Wrath of God

“God’s wrath is his steady, unrelenting, unremitting, uncompromising antagonism to evil in all its forms and manifestations.”—John R.W. Stott

Some consider the very idea as unbecoming to God. But if God is holy, it is altogether necessary for him to hate sin and to oppose it with all of his being. One explanation for our aversion to this is that we underestimate the seriousness of sin on one hand and the holiness of God on the other. Another reason is that we associate wrath and anger with human emotions that are themselves tainted with sin. But God’s wrath is a *holy* wrath. When we come to Chapter 3, we will see that the very idea of propitiation requires the idea of wrath, for a propitiation is a wrath removing sacrifice.

3. Romans 1.18—How is the wrath of God revealed?

“For the wrath of God is revealed ...” (1.18). “In view of the parallelism, the most natural way of taking v. 18 is to understand it to mean that God’s wrath also is being revealed in the gospel, that is, in the ongoing proclamation of the gospel, and to recognize that behind and basic to the revelation of the wrath of God in the preaching, is the prior revelation of the wrath of God in gospel events.... The preaching of the gospel is at the same time both the revelation of a status of righteousness before God for men and also the revelation of God’s wrath against sin.... With regard to the wrath of God, we conclude that, for Paul, its full meaning is not to be seen in the disasters befalling sinful men in the course of history: its reality is only truly known when it is seen in its revelation in Gethsemane and on Golgotha”¹

God’s wrath is also seen, of course, in the facts of human history.

¹ C.E.B. Cranfield, *Romans, A Shorter Commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1985, pages 29-30.

4. **Romans 1.18b-32**—God’s wrath revealed against all mankind, but especially the depraved Gentile world.

- a. The plain knowledge of God (which is clearly perceived and on display in creation) is **suppressed**, hindered, not allowed to operate, by sinful man. 1.18-20
- b. Ignorance is therefore no excuse. 1.20b
- c. Failing to honor and thank God leads to futility of thinking and darkened hearts. So it is really not an intellectual but a moral issue. 1.21
- d. Wise claims are made but reveal only pride and foolishness. 1.22 cf. Ps. 14.1, God’s assessment.
- e. Foolish exchanges made. Note the language used: exchange made (1.23, 25, 26), God gives them up, hands them over (1.24, 26, 28).
 - Exchanging God’s glory for idolatry and the lust and impurity that goes along with idolatry.
 - Exchanging God’s truth for a lie.
 - Exchanging natural sexual preferences for unnatural ones leads to a debased mind and the results of 1.29-32.
- f. Re-interpretations of those promoting a homosexual agenda (1.26-27). See “Straight & Narrow” by Thomas Schmidt (IVP) and “The Same Sex Controversy” by James White (Bethany House) for sound exegesis of biblical passages touching on this issue.

5. **Romans 2.1-12**—God’s wrath revealed against critical ‘moralists.’

- a. Hypocritical judges condemn themselves (2.1). To know what is right and to condemn what is wrong does not make you right, if you do what is wrong. Our tendency is to be critical of others. We see others sins so easily. The flip side of this is to give ourselves the benefit of every doubt.
- b. God’s judgment is inescapable (2.2-3).
- c. God’s judgment is delayed (2.4-5). Misreading the patience of God.
- d. God’s judgment is righteous (2.5).
- e. God’s judgment is based on works (2.6, 8).
- f. God’s judgment is impartial (2.9-11).

6. **Romans 2.12-16**—The law and God’s judgment. For the first time the law is mentioned. The point here is that mere knowledge of the law is no defense against God’s judgment.

- a. Those who sin without the law (Gentiles) will perish and those who sin under the law will be judged (2.12).
- b. There is no real distinction in the outcome, whether Jew or Gentile. Jews have the law, they hear it read every Sabbath. Gentiles don’t have the law in that sense, however the works (requirements) of the law are written on their hearts (not in the salvation sense of the new covenant promise—cf. Jeremiah 31.33; Hebrews 10.16). But they have some internal standard of right and wrong related to conscience (2.15). There are people in all cultures who are morally upright. “They are a law to themselves” (2.14) not in the popular sense that they set their own standard, but in the sense that they follow the constraints of conscience to some degree and their behavior corresponds to the requirements of the law written on their hearts. As John Stott writes however, these verses “... were not written to give us hope that human beings can gain salvation by morality.”² The whole context is to show that we are all alike sinners and therefore under God’s judgment. But there is common to all cultures some basic ideas of right and wrong that God has built into man as a reflection of his image.
- c. God will judge the things that may be hidden from others. His judgment will be by Jesus Christ and according to the gospel (2.16).

7. **Romans 2.17-29**—God’s wrath revealed against self-confident Jews (2.17).

- a. Paul describes Jewish self-confidence (2.17-20) and then begins to poke some holes in it (2.21-23), culminating with the charge that such hypocrisy is the basis for Gentile blasphemy (2.24).
- c. True circumcision is inward, spiritual and a matter of the heart. It is demonstrated by the obedience of faith (2.25-29). We have returned to the basic idea presented in this chapter that to know what is right and to condemn what is wrong does not make us right, if we do what is wrong.

8. **Romans 3.1-8**—The preceding verses seem to call into question God’s covenant with the Jews. Paul is quick to put to rest this misconception.

- a. What advantage does the Jew have, the value of circumcision? They have been entrusted with the oracles of God—the Scriptures. Paul appears to have more to say, but doesn’t (until 9.4-5; cf. 1.8).

² John R.W. Stott, *Romans*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1994, p. 88.

- b. Paul anticipates two questions which arise from the fact of Jewish unfaithfulness.
- c. First, doesn't that cancel out God's faithfulness? ["May it never be!" "God forbid!" "By no means!" This is a strong denial used repeatedly by Paul indicating that he is considering something that should never be considered (3.4).] Paul simply rejects the possibility anything could nullify God's covenant faithfulness.
- d. The next question (3.5-8) Paul takes more pains with, even though he also rejects it as unthinkable. "If our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, how can it be right for God to inflict wrath?" The idea contained is that our unrighteousness makes clearer the righteousness of God by comparison. So God should really commend us, not condemn us. This would be like saying: "I am a good example of a bad example so that others will know what a good example is. I provide a vital community service!"

9. Romans 3.9-20—The whole world held accountable to God.

- a. Both Jews and Gentiles are all under sin. There is no favoritism with regard to the judgment of God (3.10).

- b. Scriptural support is brought forth to testify and condemn (3.10-18).

"...Scripture identifies the essence of sin as ungodliness (cf. 1.18). God's complaint is that we do not really 'seek' him at all, making his glory our supreme concern, that we have not set him before us, that there is no room for him our thoughts, and that we do not love him with all our powers. Sin is the revolt of the self against God, the dethronement of God with a view to the enthronement of oneself. Ultimately, sin is self-deification, the reckless determination to occupy the throne which belongs to God alone."³

- c. "For by the works of the law no flesh (no human being) will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes the knowledge of sin." "... indeed it is the straightedge of the Law that shows us how crooked we are." JB Phillips

"So this is the point to which the apostle has been relentlessly moving. The idolatrous and immoral Gentiles are 'without excuse' (1.20). All critical moralists, whether Jews or Gentiles, equally 'have no excuse (2.1). The special status of the Jews does not exonerate them. In fact, all the inhabitants of the

³ Stott, p. 100.

whole world (3.19), without any exception, are inexcusable before god, that is, 'under accusation with no possibility of defense.'⁴

⁴ Stott, p. 102.