

God's Wrath Revealed

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we're continuing in our readings from Romans chapter 1. I think I've read more or less the same passage every week for the last four, so I will give you a slightly different passage this week.

We'll start at verse 16, and I'll read through to the end of verse 25. And if you have one of our big hardback Bibles, you'll find this on page 939, if you'd like to follow the reading.

So Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 1, verse 16, and reading to verse 25. 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.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 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.

[1 : 2 4] So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God, or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man, and birds, and animals, and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator, who is blessed forever.

Amen. And our dear Heavenly Father, we pray that your word may be, as always, a lantern to our feet, and a light to our path.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Now the fact that this passage that I've just read comes where it does come, in the letter to the Romans, may be a surprise.

[2 : 3 8] Let's remind ourselves of the context of it, which we've been studying for the last few weeks. In verse 11, do you remember, Paul has been telling his readers that he can't wait to see them. I long to see you, he says.

Why? Well, for a number of reasons, but he puts his finger on the nub of the matter in verse 15. He says, I'm eager to preach the good news, the gospel, to you also, who are in Rome.

Then we have verses 16 and 17, and they are the key statement of the letter, the statement which sets the direction and course of everything that is going to follow on. And these two verses, like verse 15, concern the gospel, the good news.

I rejoice in it, Paul is saying. I'm unashamed of it. It is the power of God for the salvation of every person who believes, either Jew or Greek, because in it, he says, is revealed, verse 17, a way in which we can be made right with God.

So Paul is very excited. He's simply bursting with this good news. You can picture him almost pacing up and down in his room, packing his bags, getting everything ready, booking his passage to Italy.

[3 : 46] He's on his way as soon as he possibly can. He's got good news to pass on. And then immediately, at the beginning of verse 18, he begins to explain this good news. Now, aren't you surprised at the way he begins?

You might look at the beginning of verse 18 and say to yourself, in what conceivable way is this good news? But here it is.

This is the start. This is the foundation block of Paul's gospel. Verse 18, the wrath of God is revealed, or is being revealed, from heaven, against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

Now, I want to say that in one sense, this must always be the starting point for the Christian gospel. It's a difficult subject. I know that.

In fact, the more that you allow your mind to dwell upon it and grapple with it, the more you see that there is really nothing more disturbing. But if you cut out, if you cut out this element from the biblical message, you end up, not with a weak or adulterated gospel, but simply with no gospel.

[4 : 56] If we are really going to see how very good the good news is, we have got to look this one in the eye and come to terms with it. The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven.

That's where Paul's gospel begins in Romans. Dr. J.I. Packer, in his great book Knowing God, writes this about the wrath of God. The modern habit throughout the Christian church is to play this subject down.

Those who still believe in the wrath of God, not all do, say little about it. Perhaps they do not think much about it. To an age which has unashamedly sold itself to the gods of greed, pride, sex, and self-will, the church mumbles on about God's kindness, but says virtually nothing about his judgment.

How often, during the past year, did you hear, or if you are a minister, did you preach a sermon on the wrath of God? How long is it, I wonder, since a Christian spoke straight on this subject on radio or television, or in one of those half-column sermonettes that appear in some national dailies and magazines?

And if a man did so, how long would it be before he would be asked to speak or write again? The fact is that the subject of divine wrath has become taboo in modern society.

[6 : 17] And Christians, by and large, have accepted the taboo and conditioned themselves never to raise the matter. I think Dr. Packer is right there.

The church today is very reluctant and has been for a long time to mention the wrath of God. And yet, Paul the Apostle, our teacher, the Apostle to the Gentiles, he begins his Gospel with an explanation of it.

How different from the way many churches are. When you were last explaining the Gospel to a friend personally, did you speak of God's anger? Many Christians today begin their explanation of the Gospel with human need.

So they will say, are you conscious of a lack in your life? Are you unhappy or unfulfilled or lacking in direction? Are you looking for joy and peace and acceptance?

Well, come to Jesus and you will find a totally new experience of life. You'll find what I've found. Joy and security. Now friends, all that is true.

[7 : 20] Wonderfully true. I don't want to deny it for a moment. Those personal experiences of new life are very precious and very real. And if we don't know anything about them, it may well be that we're not Christians at all.

But the striking thing about Romans 1 is that Paul focuses no attention whatever on the inward human experience of the convert. He does come onto that later in the epistle, but his explanation of the Gospel starts with God rather than with man.

It is a God-centered Gospel, unlike a lot of our modern evangelism, which is man-centered, centered upon human feelings and needs and experiences. Well, to put this in a slightly different way, Paul begins to unfold the Gospel by explaining the reason why men and women need to be rescued.

And the reason why they need to be rescued is not primarily because they are unhappy, but because God is angry. Now, why is it that many folk today, including many Christians, are so shy and unhappy about this doctrine of the wrath of God?

Well, first, I think, because we may have a suspicion deep down inside that wrath or anger is somehow unworthy of God. We say, surely anger is a mean and despicable passion.

[8 : 42] In fact, doesn't the Bible itself warn us against anger? Paul the Apostle himself, Colossians 3, specifically mentions anger amongst other sins as something that Christians must rid themselves of.

So how can God be angry and yet retain his divine integrity? Now, the answer to those questions is that God's divine anger is a very different thing from our human anger.

Certainly, anger would be unworthy of God if it were the same kind of anger as our human anger. But it's quite different. Our anger, when it breaks out, is usually uncontrolled, self-indulgent, spiteful, and totally unnecessary.

Isn't that right? God's anger is controlled, righteous, and necessary. It is his inevitable reaction to evil.

And could God be morally perfect if he did not react adversely to moral evil? Could he be a good God if he simply turned a blind eye to wrongdoing? We don't think much of judges in our law courts these days if they turn a blind eye to wrongdoing.

[9 : 51] If a judge or a magistrate releases a guilty man without passing an appropriate sentence on him, people are up in arms and their sense of justice is outraged. Justice has not been done, they say.

Anarchy is allowed to break out. Wrongdoing goes unpunished. So people expect human justice in human law courts and yet by means of an odd double think, these same people can say, but of course with God it's different.

It's his business to forgive and to forget. we can do as we like with God and expect him to turn a blind eye to our behaviour. But if we say that, we're making out that God has taken leave of morality, that God is just as happy with evil as he is with good.

Another reason why Christians can be shy about this doctrine of God's wrath is that we can feel that it puts people off, people who are not Christians. we might say, my friend is beginning to show a real interest in the gospel.

He said he might come to church with me someday. He said he might actually begin to read the Bible. So I'm very concerned not to put him off or to upset him. I must gently nurse the little flame of interest that seems to be burning inside him and I must make the gospel as attractive to him as I possibly can.

[11 : 10] So when I speak to him I put a big smile on my face and I say to my friend, coming to church this Sunday or this Wednesday, we have lovely bright services at our church, you know. We've got a lovely new hymn book with modern words in it.

You get a warm welcome, a nice cup of tea, well not on a Wednesday but maybe on a Sunday and the ministers, they're such nice young men. We have heartwarming, uplifting sermons about how much God loves us.

You know, you'll soon feel at home at our church. It's all terribly attractive. Now what does your friend, your friend who's not a Christian, think when he hears you speaking like that?

I would suggest not much. It really isn't going to help your friend very much to be told how nice church is or how friendly the fellowship is.

Your words, they may be well intentioned, I'm sure they are, but they're hardly going to ruffle him. If I were not a Christian and somebody spoke to me like that about bright new hymns and a nice cup of tea and friendly fellowship, I would quickly think of ten things that I'd rather do than go to church.

[12 : 12] But if somebody told me that God was angry with me, it would disturb me. Initially, I might rebel against it, maybe say something spiteful to my friend, but it would trouble me and I might find that I wanted to go to church, not for tea and fellowship, but because I wanted to find out the truth about where I stood with God.

If we're silent about the doctrine of God's wrath in the supposed interests of not putting people off, we're not actually trusting the Holy Spirit, are we? Paul was trusting the Holy Spirit here.

He didn't stop to ask, I wonder if the Romans will like this doctrine. Will they accept it? Might they put my letter down in disgust when they see what I'm on about here? No.

He trusted God. He knew that it all depended upon the Holy Spirit. He knew that God takes the gospel and applies it and opens people's eyes so that they can understand it.

That's what had happened to him after all. A third reason why people, including Christians, can be shy and unhappy about this doctrine of God's wrath is that they feel that it's not quite compatible with what they imagine the New Testament to be.

[13 : 29] It's common for people to say, of course, the God of the Old Testament, now he was an angry God, a vengeful God, whereas the God of the New Testament is a God of love and compassion.

In other words, people like to say, like to think, that the two Testaments give two different pictures of God's nature, that the loving Father of the New Testament has replaced the angry God of the Old Testament.

Now let me quickly demonstrate how false that split is, that dichotomy between two Testaments. To take it from the beginning of the New Testament, John the Baptist is introduced at the start of the Gospels and people come out in great numbers to be baptised by him and he says to them, you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?

That's the New Testament, Luke chapter 3. A little later, in the same chapter, John talks about the Messiah who is soon to come and he says about him, his winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

Then Jesus is launched into his public ministry. Mark 1, 14. Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. The good news. The time has come, he said, the kingdom of God is near, repent.

[14 : 51] That's the New Testament. This is the Lord Jesus. Repent. Why? There can only be one reason because not to repent is to fall into judgment, to meet God's anger.

Jesus' gospel begins with the word repent. Paul's gospel begins with the wrath of God. They begin therefore at the same place. The whole of the urgency of Jesus' message springs from the wrath of God.

You've only got to flick through the four gospels and you find it on every page. Listen for example to Jesus in Matthew 11. Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed because they did not repent.

Woe to you, Chorazin, he says. Woe to you, Bethsaida. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And then Jesus in the same passage, Matthew 11, goes on to speak about Capernaum, which was Simon Peter's hometown.

[15 : 56] And early in the gospels, in Mark chapter 1, there was that incident that day or two when people queued up, sick people, brought the sick in great numbers. They couldn't all be fitted into the house.

And Jesus healed everyone who came to him. How did they respond to this great ministry of healing and preaching? Matthew 11 again. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies?

No. You will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.

Now, isn't that remarkable? Sodom, the epitome of wickedness in Jewish thought, the town annihilated by sulfur and brimstone because of God's righteous anger, even that town, says Jesus, will be dealt with less severely on the day of judgment than Capernaum.

This is the New Testament. This is gentle Jesus, meek and mild. The same thing runs right the way through the apostolic preaching of the gospel in the New Testament.

[17 : 04] Take Peter on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit has first come down and filled him and the other disciples. And he preaches to this large crowd in Jerusalem. And what do the people there say when they hear his gospel sermon?

Do they smile and say how lovely, how sweet, how pleasant? Not at all. It says they were cut to the heart and they said to Peter and the other apostles, brothers, what shall we do?

You see, the truth has dawned on them. Their consciences are crying out in distress. Peter has just told them in the final words of his sermon, God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ.

So the horror has come home to them. They've crucified the Christ. They knew they could only expect the wrath of God. So how does Peter answer this agonized question from them?

Brothers, what shall we do? He says, repent. It's the same message. It's the only way. Or take Paul preaching to a Gentile audience in Athens some 15 years later telling the Greeks about the uselessness of their idols.

[18 : 09] In the past, he says, God overlooked such ignorance but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. I don't think, friends, for a moment that I'm simply playing heavily on one or two New Testament references so as to make a point.

Far from it. I'm hardly scratching the surface. Right the way through the New Testament, the Gospels, the Acts, the Epistles, the Book of Revelation, the doctrine of God's wrath keeps on surfacing.

It is one of the most potent, pervasive elements in New Testament thought. And the New Testament authors don't regard the wrath of God as being in any way incongruous with his love.

They show no embarrassment whatever in placing God's anger and God's love side by side in their teaching. You haven't got to look further than the famous John 3.16 as an example.

Love and wrath in the same verse. God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

- [19 : 15] Now why should anybody perish? Only one reason. Because of the wrath of God. Jesus has come into the world to avert the wrath of God, to propitiate the wrath of God and God sent him to do this because God loved the world so very deeply.

Now back to Romans 1.18. One of the striking things about this verse is the verb and you'll see that it's the same verb as the verb in verse 17 that we were looking at last week.

Verse 17 in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed and then verse 18 the wrath of God is revealed from heaven.

It's all by revelation. Our knowledge of God our understanding of his ways is never reached by our own inquiry and effort. Man's natural attitude to religion the world's attitude to religion is to think of it as the search for truth or the quest for God.

But the faith of the Bible is never something sought out by man. It's always something which has been revealed by God. The initiative comes entirely from heaven not from earth.

- [20 : 27] We cannot know the truth about God by intellectual effort however sincere. It can only come to us by revelation. But the danger for Christians is that we might pick and choose amongst the revelations accepting the pleasanter things that God reveals but turning a blind eye to the less comfortable things that he reveals.

But that's inconsistent isn't it? By using the same verb in verse 18 as he uses in verse 17 Paul makes it clear that the wrath of God is every bit as much revealed as God's way of making people righteous.

The two things go together. We either accept the things God reveals entirely or else we don't. We put ourselves into an impossible position if we try to have one without the other.

I remember talking this matter through with a young man some time ago. He was a friend of mine and we used to read the Bible together. But he kept on saying week after week as we read the Bible he said I cannot accept this doctrine of God's wrath and judgment.

He took up this familiar position of thinking that wrath was somehow unworthy of God. that God couldn't behave like this. So this young man wanted to have the sunshine without the clouds.

- [21 : 43] He wanted the love and the forgiveness without the wrath and judgment. In effect therefore he wanted to accept one revelation but suppress the other. And what was the consequence?

Well it was inevitable. He was on the fringe of the church. There was no depth or joy in his faith. He wasn't gripped by the gospel. And when I was last in touch with him he seemed to be drifting away from his Christian friends rather than becoming involved in the real vital church.

It was inevitable. We shall never understand how good the good news is until we understand how bleak and dreadful God's wrath is. To speak of salvation is insipid.

It's almost irrelevant if you think that somehow it's going to be alright for everybody in the end. If everybody goes to heaven why the cross? Why such agony? Why these men in the Old and New Testaments who called out so urgently and passionately for the repentance of their contemporaries?

If there's neither wrath nor judgment it simply doesn't make sense. But if there is wrath then the urgent message is at the heart of every church and at the heart of every Christian.

- [22 : 56] As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5 it is because we know the terror of the Lord that we persuade men. The wrath of God is being revealed.

Why is it being revealed? What is it that men and women have done to deserve it? Well verse 18 tells us it is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness this is the key of it suppress the truth.

Now we're used to this business of suppressing truth in political discourse and the houses of parliament and so on. We often get the feeling that we don't know the whole truth about something some big thing that's going on.

Paul is teaching us here that God's wrath is being revealed against a much more important truth suppression. That is to say the truth about him about God. In verses 19 and 20 he tells us that the truth about God is no secret to the world.

God has made it plain for everyone to see. God has given everyone the capacity to deduce from the created world what he's like. Verse 20 God's power and nature are writ large across the face of the globe.

[24 : 13] But men have said let's quietly bury this information. They have suppressed the truth about God. So if somebody mentions the subject the natural instinct is to say shh, shh, please don't talk about that.

Now why are people like this? Because by nature we want to usurp God's authority. By nature we detest having to bow before him and do what he says.

We want to run the show ourselves. It's all there in Genesis 3 in the story of the fall. Did God really say you must not eat from any tree in the garden?

Now what's the devil doing when he asks that question? He's suppressing the truth about God. The truth is that God really did say it but the devil says did God say it?

He's clouding the issue. He's muddying the waters. The truth about God had been clearly revealed to Adam and Eve but the devil blurs it and the man and woman acquiesce.

[25 : 14] It's less morally demanding and it opens up the whole delicious prospect of self-government. We'll quietly rid ourselves of God. If anyone mentions the subject we'll say shh, shh please don't talk about that.

Let's find a more congenial topic of conversation. It's against all this that the wrath of God is being revealed. But the other pressing question is how in practice and experience does God reveal his wrath against human wickedness?

Well we see his wrath being revealed in the whole principle of decay and corruption which grips the world. Paul speaks in Romans 8 of the whole creation groaning as in labor pains.

Now that was not God's original intention in creating the world. He created something perfect but as soon as Adam and Eve disobeyed his command it was not only they who were cursed the very earth was cursed with them.

God says to Adam these awful words cursed is the ground because of you. Through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you.

[26 : 24] By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food. These opening chapters of Genesis are so important. The principle of decay and disorder in the earth all stems from human sin.

Cursed is the ground because of you. Think of today. People are killed by tornadoes and earthquakes and floods and famines. Other people plant good wheat but only thorns and thistles grow.

People are continually daily being overcome by natural disasters. Even in our country which has one of the best climates in the world we have to battle against the elements and our farmers have to sweat and contend with all kinds of enemies so as to produce our food.

God didn't make it this way originally but his punishment is this that we are under a cloud. Worse than that we're under a curse. His anger is being revealed because since the Garden of Eden we've been suppressing the truth about him.

His wrath is also revealed in the fact that we die. We weren't made to originally. God made it clear to Adam and Eve that they would only die if they broke his will, his commandment. Then take the whole course of Bible history.

[27 : 39] It's one act of judgment after another. Cain is cursed and punished. The flood comes in Noah's day because of the continual wickedness of man's imagination. The Tower of Babel is an act of judgment.

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The annihilation of the Egyptians at the Red Sea. The whole story of the people of Israel is an outworking of the wrath of God. Why did God have to keep on sending his prophets generation after generation to the people?

Because they refused to obey him. They put pathetic idols in his place. They refused to trust him until God could bear their stubborn rebellion no longer.

And so he sent in the armies of Babylon to crush their beloved city. God was displaying his anger. But think of where his wrath is supremely revealed.

And that is at the cross. And it's there that both his wrath and his love are supremely shown together. If you don't see the wrath of God being revealed at the cross, you won't see his love being revealed there either.

[28 : 47] God's attitude towards sin is such that he cannot pretend that he has not seen it. He has to punish it. And the only fit and just punishment is death and destruction for the sinner.

And so Jesus became the sinner for us. He became sin as he hung upon the cross. He became the object of God's wrath.

He became our hatred of God, our rebellion against God, our enmity, our pride, our self-centeredness, our vanity, our adultery, our dishonesty, our malice, our arrogance.

All the ruination and disaster of mankind, Jesus became for us and bore the punishment. So wrath and love are revealed together.

The cross, more than anything else, shows us that there's no contradiction between a God of love and a God of wrath. He's both, and both to perfection. We would never have guessed it by our unaided reason.

[29 : 53] But these things are revealed to us by God. They belong together. Just as in verse 17, he has revealed a way of being made righteous, so in verse 18, he has revealed his wrath and is continuing to reveal it against the wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

And friends, I'm just about to finish. This is why God has provided us with a savior, to rescue us from his wrath. Jesus did not come to rescue men and women from life's little ups and downs or from our personal difficulties and hang-ups.

Or from difficult relationships or nasty employers or empty bank accounts or from arthritis and heart trouble. He came to rescue us from the wrath of God on the day of judgment.

And on that day, the day of judgment, when we see with our own eyes the great everlasting division opened up between the saved and the lost, when we see with our own eyes the beauties of heaven and the anguish of hell, we shall thank him on that day that he let us know about the wrath of God and that he let us know about the way to be saved.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Amen. how we thank you dear Father, dear Heavenly Father, that as well as this revelation of your wrath, you have also revealed for us a way in which we may be made and counted righteous in your sight.

[31 : 35] we thank you again for Jesus, who is the answer to this terrible predicament and problem, the answer that you yourself in such love have provided for the world.

Help us, dear Father, to embrace him and the good news about him and to cling to him forever so that we might, like John Bunyan's pilgrim, be members of that great eternal city on the last day.

And we ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.