

Grace Community Church

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The Ongoing Revelation of the Wrath of God in History

These Expository Notes are devotional in nature and represent the pulpit ministry at Grace Community Church, instead of more polished detailed exposition.

One of the most helpful commentaries on the *Epistle to the Romans* is John R. W. Stott's who introduces this new section with profound summarizing insight.

Nothing keeps people away from Christ more than their inability to see their need of him or their unwillingness to admit it. As Jesus put it: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners." [Mark 2:17]...For just as we go to the doctor only when we are ill and can't cure ourselves, so we will go to Christ only when we admit that we are guilty sinners and cannot save ourselves...It is this plain and unpopular principle which lies behind Romans 1:18-3:20. (p. 67)

A few months ago I enjoyed the challenge of food poisoning and in my typical fashion I determined to let it play out. Before it would run through my system (i.e., literally) in 24 hours; it would be an ugly 24 hours. But knowing my system would eventually discard all the poison somewhat quickly, gave hope. But a few months ago it was a different challenge. I continued after 24 hours, then after 48 hours, then after 72 hours and even after 96 hours. Finally it dawned on me, "Doug you are not going to get rid of this on your own and you've degenerated such that you desperately need a physician for serious dehydration. So I called Charles at 5:30am and told him "I'm loosing the battle; can to come over and take me to the hospital?" This experience illustrates Stott and the Apostle Paul's point, i.e., too often mankind wrongly

thinks they can spiritually heal themselves as they lack an awareness of how desperate their condition is; they need a spiritual physician. So before the Apostle Paul gives the physician's good news about the cure of sin in justification, sanctification and glorification, he diagnoses the desperateness of the human problem which in 1:18-3:20, is explained as hopeless, terrible and yes, frightening.

Let's take a birds-eye view of this new section where the Apostle diagnosis the seriousness of the human sick condition. Again for this we turn to Stott's outline.

The way Paul demonstrates the universality of human sin and guilt is to divide the human race into several sections and to accuse them one by one. In each case his procedure is identical. He begins by reminding each group of their knowledge of God and of goodness. He then confronts them with the uncomfortable fact that they have not lived up to their knowledge. Instead they have deliberately suppressed it, even contradicted it by continuing to live in unrighteousness...Nobody can plead innocence, because nobody can plead ignorance.

First (1:18-32), he portrays depraved Gentile society in its idolatry, immorality and antisocial behavior.

Second (2:1-16), he addresses critical moralizers (whether Gentiles or Jews), who profess high ethical standards and apply them to everybody except themselves.

Third (2:17-3:8), he turns to self-confident Jews, who boost of their knowledge of God's law, but do not obey it. (p. 68)

We are going to find in Paul's diagnosis of the human problem that one of the central truths of the Bible is that the Lord is a sin-hating God. That is, He deplores *all forms* of wickedness and punishes *all forms* of unrighteousness; His anger rages against *all forms* of sin and man in his unrepentant "heart treasurest up wrath, against the day of wrath." (cf. Rom. 2:5)

And yet, the Biblical doctrine of the wrath of God is almost universally *ignored*, if not *denied*, in contemporary Christianity in general and even in Evangelicalism in particular. We cherish a *modern myth* centered in thoughts of a benevolent merciful God who tolerates our weaknesses and winks at our sins; we view God as a proud grandfather, who loves to spoil and pamper us, but doesn't demand that we live a certain way. We think people are generally good, not spiritually sick or in any case desperate. And admittedly this is the conclusion of anyone who stays away from the revelation of God in the Bible. Leave your Bible unopened for a month or two and you begin to think this way; keep your Bible open in regular reading and you will begin, as you diagnosis the human condition, that mankind is foul, polluted, lawless, sinful and desperately spiritually sick. This first major section of Romans 1:18-3:20 needs to be carefully studied by all of us, to correct our contemporary mistaken idea that mankind is essentially good and not as fallen as previous generations claimed.

We say this is a *modern myth*, not because it is new, as this skewed view of God has popped up throughout the history of the Christian church. But it's modern in the sense that it seems *entrenched* within mainstream Christian thought and evangelical thought. Instead of small splinter groups or liberal pockets here and there, that deny God's wrath, today that clearly revealed doctrine is *ignored* and even *denied* in most churches.

During our lesson today we want to begin a study of the first major section of the *Epistle to the Romans*, where the Apostle Paul explodes this *modern myth* by describing the fallen

condition of mankind giving a summary of his theme that he will develop in detail from Rom. 1:18-3:20. Then next lesson will begin to unpack the *reason why* the wrath of God shows itself in the affairs of mankind and will be manifested with such terrible vengeance, on that day of future judgment! In the *Epistle to the Romans*, before Paul explains God's good news of justification, sanctification and glorification he *carefully* and *methodically* outlines the fallen condition of mankind. In this first section of Romans, which begins in chapter one verse 18 and continues to chapter 3 verse 20, the themes of *sin*, *wrath* and *judgment* dominate each paragraph! As John MacArthur says, "For Paul, fear of eternal condemnation is the first motivation he offered for coming to Christ, the first pressure he applied to evil men." As a wise doctor of the souls of men and women, Paul knew that a *precise diagnosis* must precede a successful *prognosis*, so he carefully declares man's lostness and fallen condition. The Apostle Paul begins this section by writing...

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness. (cf. Rom. 1:18)

Just like the "righteousness of (better *from*) God" is being revealed in the gospel of God about Christ, so Paul explains that the "wrath of God" is also being revealed.

The *present tense* in the Greek text, suggests the sense that the "wrath of God" is right now being revealed in ongoing history; not that it will be revealed in the future, which Paul will also explain in chapter two; but it is *now* being revealed, at this time! We explore this essential heading verse 18 (1:19-3:20) under three major questions: What is the wrath of God? Where is it directed? And why? The third question we await for the next lesson as it rightly goes with 1:19-20.

What is the Wrath of God?

We need to pause long enough to define the “wrath of God.” What is it? J. I. Packer in his classic book *Knowing God*, summarizes this attribute this way...

‘Wrath’ is an old English word defined in my dictionary as ‘deep, intense anger and indignation.’ ‘Anger’ is defined as ‘stirring of resentful displeasure and strong antagonism, by a sense of injury or insult’; ‘indignation’ as ‘righteous anger aroused by injustice and baseness.’ Such is wrath. And wrath, the Bible tells us, is an attribute of God...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.

And this *presently revealed* wrath of God is “from heaven.” This indicates that it comes from the very throne of God Himself. The term “wrath” (Greek, orge) is a settled or carefully determined indignation; not a sudden or momentary anger (Greek, thumos). The concept as an attribute of God is actually derived from a series of OT terms sprinkled often throughout the first 39 books of the Bible. The Apostle Paul is summarizing what the Scripture clearly taught in the OT and affirming that God hasn’t changed in His angry reaction against sin.

For example, one OT term is hara (used 19 times in the OT) and suggest getting heated or to burn in fury, as if God Himself is emotionally stirred to a fiery anger. Abraham sensed God’s hara when he appealed, “Let not the Lord be angry” (cf. Gen. 18:30).

A similar term is haron (used 41 times in OT) means a burning and fierce wrath. Moses sang of what happened in the drowning of the Egyptian army, “You have overthrown those who rose against you. You sent forth your wrath; it consumed them like stubble.” (Exod. 15:7)

The term quatsaph (used 34 times in the OT) means bitter. The first generation out of Egypt of unbelieving and rebellious Israel, where Moses reminded them, “The Lord heard the

sound of your words and was angry and took an oath” (i.e., of destruction; Deut. 1:34).

The additional Hebrew term hemah means venomous and poisonous and is frequently used of God’s jealousy. King Josiah on finding the lost Books of Moses and reading it, said...

2 Kings 22:13. Go, inquire of the LORD for me, for the people and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the LORD that is aroused against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.” (cf. 2 Kings 22:13)

A final Hebrew term is zaam (used 20 times in OT, mostly in reference to God) refers to a foaming at the mouth. Most often it is translated “indignation,” as David declared that “God is a righteous judge and a God who has indignation every day.” (Psalm 7:11)

The point I am making is that there are a huge family of passages speaking of God’s wrath in the OT. Of these five major terms and the twenty different terms they represent, offer some 580 occurrences in the OT. This is huge to say the least. As matter of fact, it could be that the subject of God’s wrath and judgment is the most often mentioned doctrine in the Bible.

This summer I was touring *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary* in Louisville with Gunner and I had just found in the bookstore a new release, “God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment” by professor James M. Hamilton Jr. We were walking to the next building and I was browsing the book as we walked and we ran into the book’s author. Gunner introduced us and I told Dr. Hamilton I was eager to carefully read his book because in my own often readings through the Bible his thesis pressed itself on my own mind, i.e., the center of Biblical theology is God’s glory in salvation through judgment. Yes, the subject of God’s wrath is most often mentioned in the Scripture and the first subject presented in God’s Gospel or His revelation to mankind.

Paul starts, assuming the OT doctrine and starts here with a development of the Gospel of God. Before presenting the love and grace of God, we must start with the anger, fury and impending judgment of God.

In 1932 liberal scholar C. H. Dodd published a commentary on the *Epistle to the Romans*, claiming Paul's usage of "the wrath of God" is used in an *impersonal* way. His thesis was that what appears to be God's expressed personal wrath is nothing of the sort but an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe. Sin is the cause; wrath is the result, i.e., nature reacts to sin in an impersonal way. God isn't involved but had created a world in which the course of nature reacts negatively to overt moral transgression.

Leon Morris in his outstanding theological book *The Apostolic Preaching and the Cross*, corrects C. H. Dodd's extreme view that judgment expressed is some impersonal force of nature and summarizes, the OT foundation that Paul was building Romans 1:18-3:20 on...

To the men of the Old Testament the wrath of God is both very real and very serious. God is not thought of as capriciously angry (like the deities of the heathen), but, because He is a moral Being, His anger is directed towards wrongdoing in any shape or form. Once roused, this anger is not assuaged, and dire consequences may follow. (p. 149)

It is difficult to image how the prophets and psalmists could possibly have expressed more strongly the personal character of the wrath of God. While disaster is regarded as the inevitable result of man's sin, it is so in the view of the Old Testament, not by some inexorable law of the impersonal Nature, but because a holy God wills to pour out the vials of His wrath upon those who commit sin. Indeed, it is largely because wrath is so fully personal in the Old Testament that mercy becomes so fully personal, for mercy is the action of the same God who was angry, allowing His wrath to be turned away. (p. 152)

So what is it? What is this wrath? Is it the appearance of worldly disasters just creation impersonally reacting in a cause and effect relationship with moral transgression or is it the direct personal expression of an angry God? It may be surprising but in one sense it is both. The Apostle Paul in Romans 8 will talk about the "creation groaning and travailing until now," where the world is seen as diseased in such a way that it is not working like it should; but in Romans 1:18-3:20 the Apostle Paul is clearly proclaiming the *personal* anger, burning fury, fierceness, bitter, poisonous, wrath of Almighty God against sin or lawbreaking mankind. Matter of fact, this is where the Gospel of God starts, i.e., with a clear revelation of God's burning settled anger against sin! And may I add looking ahead that this scary truth is often mentioned in the *Epistle to the Romans*? Consider...

Rom 2:2-9. But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things. And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself **wrath** in the day of **wrath** and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who "will render to each one according to his deeds": eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness--indignation and **wrath**, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek;

Rom 3:5-6. But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unjust who inflicts **wrath**? (I speak as a man) Certainly not! For then how will God judge the world?

Rom 4:14-15. For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, because the law brings about **wrath**; for where there is no law there is no transgression.

Rom 5:8-9. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from **wrath** through Him.

Rom 9:21-22. Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? What if God, wanting to show His **wrath** and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of **wrath** prepared for destruction,

Rom 12:19. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to **wrath**; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.

Rom 13:4-5. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute **wrath** on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of **wrath** but also for conscience' sake.

Matter of fact, it is so *personal*, notice where it is directed...

Where is God's Wrath Directed?

Notice in Romans 1:18 it is directed *presently* "against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." First, it is revealed against "all ungodliness" or *asebeia*, sins of a *religious* nature. This is sin characterized as an attack on the majesty of God; it is various ways in which men and women ignore God, i.e., they care less about glorifying Him, they don't give Him thanks for being created or preserved by Him, they seek to remove Him from their daily thinking, etc. They are "ungodly," which is the

major affront to the majesty of the Creator. Paul as a Jew would of course be thinking primarily of the first four of the Ten Commandments.

Exod 20:3-11. **[one]** "You shall have no other gods before Me. **[two]** You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. **[three]** "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain. **[four]** "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

Secondly, God's wrath is *presently* being revealed against "all ungodliness" or *adikia*, referring to sins of a *moral* nature. These are sins characterized as a *violation of God's just order*. In various ways men and women rebel against the law of God, ignore His will when they make decision, break known commandments, transgress His will. They are "unrighteous" and give challenge to His moral nature. This is the Second table of the Ten Commandments...

Exod 20:12-17. **[five]** "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you. **[six]** "You shall not murder. **[seven]** "You shall not commit adultery. **[eight]** "You shall not steal. **[nine]** "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. **[ten]** "You shall not covet

your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's."

Another commentator defines "ungodliness" as "lack of reverence for, devotion to, and worship of the true God, a failure that inevitably leads to some form of false worship; and "unrighteousness" is defined as, encompassing the idea of ungodliness "but focuses on its result. Sin first attacks God's *majesty* and then His *law*...Ungodliness unavoidably leads to unrighteousness."

Now take a moment to let this sink in! God's wrath is presently being revealed against *all*, not some but all, "ungodliness" and "unrighteousness." God doesn't discriminate and ignore sin, in whatever form and from whatever source! This truth needs to be pressed home to our hearts, as too many professing believers live under the delusion that they are somehow *exempt* from God's hot displeasure and judgment of their sin. Remember Hebrews 10?...

For we know Him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge His people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (vss. 30-31)

These men, says Paul, "hold the truth in unrighteousness," that is, they suppress the truth or hold it down. They restrain the truth from taking hold of their thoughts and demanding of their conduct; they ignore the fact about God and his righteous demands on their life; they refuse the "good to choose the evil!" Psalm 14 and Psalm 53 both begin the same way...

The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. [perhaps we should punctuate that differently, and read it, "The fool hath said in his heart, No God!" That is, the conscious thought of God is *supressed*. He's not an athiest, but someone refusing to entertain the convicting thought of God in his mind!] Corrupt are they, and have done abominable iniquity; there is none that

doeth good. God looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, that did seek God. Every one of them is gone back; they are altogether become filthy. There is none that doeth good, no not one.

Here is where "all ungodliness and unrighteousness" spring from - the sinful mind that *suppresses* the truth of God, for as Paul continues and we will examine in detail next time...

Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shown it unto them, for the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse. (cf. Rom. 1:19-20)

That is, *all men and women* have a consciousness of God, which is "in them" and is *empirically* verified by the "creation of the world." This external natural revelation of the existence, Person and power of God, isn't sufficient to bring men and women to salvation but it is sufficient to make them responsible! Ever since the creation of the world and the first man Adam, the whole of the human race are "without excuse" by the innate sense they have of God's existence as validated by the hundreds and thousands of manifestations of the created order!

Paul's point is that "all ungodliness and unrighteousness" falls under the wrath of God, because the *universal haunting* truth of the existence of God makes everyone personally accountable. No one can *retreat* into the excuse that they didn't know better; or that their parents abused them; or that they came from dysfunctional families; or that their environment was less than ideal; or as Flip Wilson used to joke, "The devil made me do it!" There is no escape hatch from God's universe - you and I, and all men and women, must face the sin-hating God of wrath as responsible, accountable creatures!

My friend, I hope during our brief time together, you and I have recovered *a renewed*

sense of the “wrath of God.” We need to reflect deeply and continually on this solemn reality! A. W. Pink agrees, as he writes...

The wrath of God is a perfection of the Divine character on which we need to meditate frequently. First, that our hearts may be duly impressed by God’s detestation of sin. We are ever prone to regard sin lightly, to gloss over its hideousness, to make excuses for it. But the more we study and ponder God’s abhorrence of sin and His frightful vengeance upon it, the more likely are we to realize its heinousness. Second, to beget a true fear in our souls for God. ‘Let us have grace whereby we may fear God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: for our God is a consuming fire’ (Heb. 12:28, 29). We cannot serve Him ‘acceptably’ unless there is due ‘reverence’ for His awful Majesty and ‘godly fear’ of His righteous anger, and these are best promoted by frequently calling to mind that ‘our God is a consuming fire.’

To realize that “all ungodliness and all unrighteousness” falls under the *indictment* of God and His *wrath* is being revealed at this present time, awaiting an even greater revelation of it at the judgment day, should cause each of us to walk circumspectly during our personal *Quest of the New Testament!*