

Ad-Mission Campaign
What If it's True?
Is There Really a God?
Romans 1:18-32

Text:

Romans 1:18-32 (ESV)

¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰For 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. So they are without excuse. ²¹For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³and **exchanged** the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

²⁴Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they **exchanged** the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

²⁶For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women **exchanged** natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; ²⁷and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

²⁸And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³²Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

Introduction:

We want to begin this morning by addressing our postmodern culture that has abandoned objective reality, absolute truth and presuppositional rationality and be able to offer them a biblical explanation for their dilemma. It really is the human dilemma addressed by Paul here in Roman chapter 1. What is it that our culture needs to know about God, about their plight and about their way to reconciliation?

The Revelation of God's Wrath (v.18)

The first thing to see about God is that there is such a thing as the wrath of God. That is clear from v. 18 – “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven.” But the wrath of God is not simply a future event yet to occur, although Romans 2:5 says that it will be poured out in the future:

Romans 2:5 (ESV)

⁵ But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

So while there is a day of wrath yet to be revealed, that is not what our text says. 1:18 says that the “wrath of God is *being* (present, passive tense) revealed already from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of mankind.” The wrath of God is currently trickling down upon all ungodliness and unrighteousness of mankind until the day of the outpouring of the full fury of his anger.

When I read these two passages together, I conjure up the mental image of a river that is feeding and filling a reservoir while a slow trickle is released on the other side by way of a small creek. One day, the dam will burst and the valley down below will be deluged with the full fury of the water being stored up. Well, today, we live in the time of the trickle effect of God's wrath.

But what does the wrath of God being poured out today look like? And what are the reasons for the wrath being revealed? What does our culture need to know about their dilemma?

We have seen that God wrath is revealed; let's notice the reason for this wrath.

The Reason for God's Wrath (vv. 19-21)

The last words of v. 18 provide us a clue as to why God's wrath is presently revealed. Notice the words, “suppress the truth.” Think for a moment about that word “suppress” and what it implies. Douglas Moo, a commentator on the book of Romans says, “People cannot suppress something that they do not have” (56). Think about that as we relate it to our postmodern culture. So Paul implies that people have access to the truth. Read again vv.19-21:

Romans 1:19-21 (ESV)

¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ 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. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Paul makes three basic points:

1. God has manifested his truth to all human beings. 1:19 says that God has made it plain to them. In theological terms, Paul is teaching about natural revelation – that truth which God reveals about himself through nature and the natural order. But...

2. The truth contained in natural revelation is limited. In v. 20 Paul spells out just what information God has made plain to humans. But notice how he says it with an ironic contrast that we might call an oxymoron. “For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived.” His “*invisible* attributes” have been “*clearly seen*.” That’s odd. How do you see something clearly that is invisible? But what has he revealed? The specific answer is “his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature.” From what God has revealed in nature, people can know that God exists and that God is powerful, but they cannot know his specific requirements of them (law), his plan for them, or his desire to rescue them from his wrath.
3. Natural revelation cannot mediate a saving message; it can only confine mankind to wrath. Paul says, it makes them “without excuse.” Mankind cannot claim ignorance when the wrath of God is poured out on them. Why? Because they actually “knew God.”

Now, all we have established this far is to say that God has provided sufficient revelation for all mankind to know God exists and that he exists powerfully. We have not yet answered the question “why has God revealed his wrath?” That answer comes in the second part of v. 21 where Paul uncovers the universal response of all humans when they clearly see God – they suppress the truth. How? “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.”

The way you suppress the truth is by failing to honor God as God and by failing to thank him as good.

That is the truth: we should glorify and thank God.

So here is the truth that we suppress apart from God's grace in our lives. There is a God. He is the Creator of all things. He is powerful - more powerful than all else, because he made all else. He is eternal because there was nothing outside him that could bring him into being. Therefore we must exist to display his glory and not to compete with him for glory. And we must exist in absolute dependence on him. We do not supply him, he supplies us. And therefore we are to live in constant gratitude. But we do not!

In other words, the truth is that the universe is radically God-centered: it comes from him, it exists for the display of his glory. And human life is supposed to be radically God-centered - not by working for God as if he were a needy deity, but by our being thankful to him and exulting in the grace that so much good comes to us, even amid terrible suffering.

It means that God has created a universe in which we get the blessings and he gets the glory. And the way God gets the glory is by our exulting in him as the all-sufficient Giver of all things.

We Get the Blessing and He Gets the Glory

So why has God revealed his wrath against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of mankind? Are you ready for the answer? The reason God is revealing wrath presently, and the reason mankind is storing up wrath for the future is owing to the fact that ***God is a very important person who does not like being ignored!***

I like this illustration from John Piper:

Suppose you ask a man – say, the president of a company – "Under God, who's the most important person in your life?" And suppose he says, "Probably my vice president for marketing." And you say, "What about your wife?" And he says, "O . . . I just assume that. Sure, that goes without saying.

It may be that a few people would assume that it was his abounding affection and respect for his wife that kept her from coming to mind. But most of us, especially his wife, I think, would assume the opposite: namely, she didn't come to mind because she's not of paramount importance in his mind. She goes without saying because she goes without significance.

And we can be certain that she does not like it. She does not say, "I feel so loved and so honored because my husband never thinks to mention me among his top priorities. I am like the air he breathes – he never gives me a thought." That's not what she says. What she says is this: "If I don't come to your mind to talk about, then I am not important to you. And if you think that I am honored by being taken for granted, then you are wrong, because I'm not."

The message our culture and our own hearts needs to hear is this: God is a very important person who hates being ignored. And for that reason – because man after man and woman after woman refuses to acknowledge God, refuse to honor God, refuses to thank God for his goodness and greatness – God pours out his wrath. You see, when we refuse to glorify God we compete with god for glory and all Gods competitors go to hell.

Now we are not quite done. His wrath is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of mankind as they suppress the truth. Mankind suppresses the truth of God's glory and goodness as seen in creation by refusing to glorify him and God and to thank him as good. And in so doing, notice the last phrase of v.21, "they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened."

They became futile in their thinking – their foolish hearts were darkened. Do you see the passive voice in those verbs? As they were actively choosing to not honor God or thank God, another action outside of themselves was being acted upon them. Someone else was doing the darkening and the blinding. Who? Yes! God is trickling out his wrath upon them by making them blind to the truth and hard in their hearts. The wrath of God is not just **punishment**, though that is certainly part of it; but more importantly, the wrath of God that is now being revealed is **banishment** to more and more ungodliness and unrighteousness. And in that way, humans all across the world are storing up more and more wrath until the day of God's full fury (cf. Rom. 2:5). God banishes them to more and more.

Do you want to see what that looks like, this banishment to evil? Do you want to see the process God takes them through?

The Result of God's Wrath (vv.22-32)

Read again vv. 22-32:

²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and **exchanged** the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they **exchanged** the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women **exchanged** natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; ²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

It is paramount that you see the three-fold “exchange...give over” pattern (vv.23-24; 25-26a; 26b-28). In each case human beings put aside the truth of God revealed in nature and put in its place their own perverted notions and actions. In so doing, they call it “wisdom” while Paul calls these exchanges “foolish.”

1. The first great exchange is idolatry (vv.23-24). Mankind exchanges the true God for false gods, or non-gods, for idols. And it is important to remember that idolatry is not confined to images on altars like one would see in Asia; it also includes sports and cars and jobs and hobbies, etc. (Read the article in the TM, *When Ball Becomes Baal*, by Jim Elliff). And as a result of mankind's exchange, God hands them over to “the lusts of their heart.”
2. The second great exchange is sexual abandon (vv.25-26a). Paul continues by saying that because they exchange truth for a lie, God gives them over to dishonorable passions – passions that are contrary to nature. Remember they are suppressing the truth about God that is clearly seen in nature.
3. The third great exchange is, what I will call, an upside-down morality (vv.26b-32). As mankind progresses lower and lower in ungodliness and unrighteousness, God progressively hands them over to banishment until they come to the place now where they are not simply doing evil but approving evil.

There is a bit of a Greek word play in this last paragraph beginning in v. 18. Paul says that “since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them over.” The word for “acknowledge” means to approve something as worthy or valuable, to find something approving in one's sight. It is the same word he ends with in v. 32. Although they do not find God approving in their sight, they now find sin approving. In other words, they have come full circle in their immorality. They call immoral-moral and moral-immoral.

I have been told by biblical counselors that in the upcoming DSM-5th edition (Diagnostics and Statistics Manual) used by psychologists and psychiatrists for

diagnosing mental disorders that “homophobia” will be listed as a mental disorder. This means that in the not-to-distant future, a Bible believing Christian who believes homosexuality is a sin can be locked up as crazy. What is moral to God has become immoral to mankind and visa versa.

But do you see Paul’s point? In the last great exchange, God hands mankind “over to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.” Homosexuality is not alone on this list; it is joined by a host of others. You can read them later. Go to the end at v. 32:

Though they know God’s decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

The end result of sin’s downward spiral is not homosexuality but the condoning of all manner of ungodliness and unrighteousness. If mankind condones all manner of ungodliness as acceptable, it means they can no longer be conscious of their sin. That is, they have become blind to evil and hardened to righteousness. God has banished them to evil.

The wrath of God against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of mankind is the human dilemma. Banished to more and more evil! Is there no hope?

The Removal of God’s Wrath (vv.16-17)

Oh, but there is. Go all the way back to the beginning of v.18 and notice the first word – “for” or “because.” Why is that word there? It is a connector word linking vv.18-32 with vv.16-17:

Romans 1:16-17 (ESV)

¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

The reason we have the good news of the Gospel is because the wrath of God is being revealed. Because the wrath of God is being revealed, we need to have the righteousness of God to be revealed. And the message that men and women who have been banished to unrighteousness can be made right with God in his righteousness is revealed in the gospel.

The human dilemma can be reversed by the power of God in the gospel.

The world needs to know that God is a very important person who hates being ignored. Thus, they need to hear God speak directly to their hearts as we carry the gospel to them.

“how beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news...for faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of God” (Rom. 10:16-17)

Church – don’t take God for granted – glorify him in your life – and honor him before your neighbor. Proclaim the gospel.