**GOD’S WRATH AGAINST UNRIGHTEOUSNESS**

Romans 1:18-32

Key verse 18-19

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.”

 The opening introduction to the Romans was very gracious and inspiring. Paul was so happy for those who were called to the family of God in Christ Jesus because their faith was mentioned all over the world. Paul eagerly hoped to visit and impart a spiritual gift, enjoy mutual encouragement and share in their harvest among the gentiles. After the encouraging introduction, today's passage suddenly turns to the scariest part of human reality, the wrath of God and why it is looming over everyone. It leads into Paul's straightforward depiction of individual actions and many accusative questions in the next chapters. We like to quote the verses when we accuse the lost world of sinning, but we read this part quickly in private so we don't feel much guilt. It points out so many things wrong with me and we don't like to face the facts. Seeing the same problems and crooked attitudes still operating wherever we look leaves some wondering how God can be so patient toward the world and why human beings cannot seem to do right in God’s view. Let’s pray to appreciate Paul’s harsh reality check as much as we like his hopeful impression of our eternal blessing.

SLIDE 17-18 There is a shocking contrast between the last part’s good tidings and today's passage, so let’s read verse 17 and 18 together for a little reminder. “17 For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." 18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” Here are two polar opposite concepts: righteousness from God and the wrath of God. Righteousness from God makes people holy for eternal life while his wrath sentences them to death. Discussing them so close together is a stark indicator that there must be both in our reality. We wish there were no wrath of God, since we could act however we like. But since the righteousness of God exists, we can understand his hope for us and believe it is possible to be rescued from our fate, by faith.

The wrath of God being revealed seems like it is also inter-connected to the good news of salvation that is spreading out to the nations. It may be argued that if there is no wrath of God, we don't need any gospel. So, people need to know about both to understand the need of salvation. (SLIDE 2 Corinthians) Paul remarked on the inter-connection in 2 Corinthians saying, "15 For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. 16 To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life." Sharing the gospel is bringing good news, but it also reminds everyone of the bad news, the truth about their sins. (SLIDE v18) Verse 18 says sinful men are very good at suppressing the truth by their wickedness. Suppressing the truth to do something wrong is the basic nature of sinners. As soon as Eve tasted forbidden fruit she suppressed the truth that it would lead to death and shared it with Adam. Ever since then, all kinds of godlessness and wickedness abounded again and again. Especially the far off gentiles suppressed the truth of God for thousands of years after spreading all over earth from the Tower of Babel. As time went by, God revealed himself to a few and blessed some to become a large nation of Israelites but the nation also suppressed the truth and abandoned God and disappointed him over and over. Now alongside the gospel message, God is sharing the fact of his impending judgement with every nation so all people may re-examine their relationship with God and have the chance to fix it up.

(SLIDE v19) Verse 19 delves into the incredibly personal nature of our suppression. It says … “what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.” Each individual since creation has the same individual responsibility to acknowledge God. They are made in his image so they do understand his heartbreaking despair when betrayed or disregarded. In the fundamental aspect of existence in this creation, people do have a sense of authority and belonging and even a desire to experience eternity which seems to culminate with God at the top. We are just very good at suppressing the truth of our intuitions when pleasing God contradicts our sinful desires.

(SLIDE v20) We might try to justify our world wide disregard for God by saying he ignored all other nations and only cared about his so called “chosen people,” but verse 20 seems to prevent it. Let’s read verse 20 together. “20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” We have no excuse. The ignoring God problem has been the same since the beginning of creation. (SLIDE Psalm 19) It is not just a new testament theory either. Psalm 19:1 mentioned the heavens declaring his handiwork. So another ancient Bible writer came to a similar conclusion about our intuitive awareness of God. Our awe and wonder about the universe are integrated into our consciousness because we are linked to god in higher dimensions. (SLIDE v20) Nevertheless, I feel that verse 20 seems confusing for saying God's invisible qualities are clearly seen. How do we see invisible things? Two English Bibles seem to handle the ambiguous concept minimally better. (SLIDE v20 other versions)

Smith's Literal Translation

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world, being understood by things made, are inspected, truly both his eternal power and divinity; so that they are inexcusable:

English Standard Version

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.

These translations help reduce the literal translation's awkwardness by saying we perceived or even inspected God's invisible things. These translations convey the fact that we thought about our sinful actions, intuitively knowing they would displease the creator and yet, we did not repent. They also convey the broad metaphorical meaning of being able to see God's point of view toward the sinful world. Consequently, these translations make our accountability all the more apparent and our disregard for god much more like deliberate ignorance. All the translations indicate Paul established accountability. He believes that as created things, we have a general awareness of God that leaves mankind without any excuse for disregarding God.

(SLIDE acts 17) Here is an excerpt from one of Paul’s messages on this subject. He shared it with the people of Athens.

24 "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. 5 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.27 God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 28 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' 29 "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone--an image made by man's design and skill. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

Paul theologically concludes that God remaining invisible to the majority of people had a good intention. That we might reach out for him and find him. (SLIDE created things) We do perceive his divine nature: revealed in God's life giving grace to the universe. We appreciate living things all around us and share joy over little new life things. We marvel that God is creative with such diversity we cannot measure it. Many people astound us with their creativity too. Whether they acknowledge it or not, they are also made in God's image, so we all have the capacity to reveal God's invisible qualities to each other. It is obvious to people that living things are precious, yet they suppress the truth as they exalt themselves over each other and squeeze God out of the picture.

(SLIDE v22-24) From verse 22, Paul starts a list of ways humans degraded themselves and how we defamed the image of God we were created in. He also shares some consequences.

22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. 24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.

Even in our time, these are very relatable. Our awe and fascination with created things can lead to idolatrous behavior. Creative artists make dazzling portrayals of created things that we appreciate and can easily cross the line to worship and idolize. (SLIDE with computer) I noticed a subtle, borderline idolatrous case in many scenes where people who are entertaining themselves declare, "Oh my God" as if they are worshiping their computer screen, sports or entertainment idols. And degrading sexual experiences are among the top temptations that humans seem to crave. (SLIDE v25) Consequently, verse 25 says, 25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator--who is forever praised. Amen.

What a terrible effect that the creatures made in God's image to honor and praise and glorify God forever, abandoned their purpose to worship and serve the three dimensional creation. It is a mystery why God gave them over to be ruled by their sinful nature when it causes much grief and disappointment for God and endless oppression and strife among people. Why doesn't he blast individual sinners from heaven with obvious divine punishments so everyone will see and tremble and repent? (SLIDE 2 Peter 3) Another Bible passage described it as God's long-suffering patience, waiting for some to come to their senses, appreciate his blessing and seek his fellowship and his kingdom.

2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

2 Peter 3:15 Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom that God gave him.

Of course, the right way to live would be that all people honor God and give thanks to him for all they enjoy and experience. They should exemplify and pursue his divine nature trying their best to do well for each other even as God shines the sun on the evil and the just. So, if you catch yourself worshiping created things with an "Oh my God" moment, say something like "Oh thank God" for reminding me of my sinful tendencies.

(SLIDE ...gave them over...) In this passage Paul mentions three times God's decision toward the crooked folks who gave up on him. First he says God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. These are likely the adulterers and rapists and folks who marry and divorce to marry whomever they choose, like in the days of Noah. Even the sinful young people who fool around and hook up without any thought of God's plan for family might be included. Next he said God gave them over to shameful lusts that seem to single out same-sex relationships into a separate class of sexual sins. Lastly, Paul wrote " he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done, as the consequence of giving up on and abandoning the knowledge of God. This is followed by a dreadful list of despicable human behavior and characteristics that everyone hates to see in others, but which we all get tempted by at some point. (SLIDE v29-31) "They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless." As we went through the list, did you say to yourself, "I never did that one, so I'm ok." I could feel a stab in the conscience from every single trait. It is awful to consider how easily our minds can fall into hypocritical justification as we do all those wicked things. But we are very good at suppressing the truth about our actual bad attitude and evil behavior.

(SLIDE v32) Verse 32 is very honest about human beings. It is the perfect depiction of those who choose not to retain the knowledge of God. 32 Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. Just as Paul is not ashamed of the Gospel, he is equally urgent about pointing out the worst of our tendencies that bring on the wrath of God. He shows us that it is very important to remind each other that God's wrath is coming on the people who are doing those things. Look how severe true justice is. We might agree a few of the things in his list deserve a death-penalty, but God's righteous decree is that all such things are worthy of death sentence. This whole description is hard to bear, but it seems to encapsulate the big picture of all human history. Here and there groups got a chance to start fresh, but all progressed backward into the same sad tendencies.

Living without God, people progressed from the garden of Eden to the flood into a very wicked sexual impurity. From the flood to Abraham they progressed into idolatry and proud activities trying to make a name for themselves. Abraham's descendants got a fresh start but envied the pagans and worshiped many gods in detestable ways. After captivity to purge them of idolatry they established an overbearing burdensome implementation of their Mosaic laws and lived hypocritically. Meanwhile all the rest of the world left God out completely, and existed dog-eat-dog style in every land on earth.

Societies became isolated, fearful of each other and fell under demonic influences as their crooked thinking and godlessness progressed. Although they spread all over the earth, families still suffer under cruel parents and unloving spouses who torture each other too much. Individuals lose the image of God and live in fear of each other or become proud of themselves and cruel toward others. The fact that all die in Adam seems the most evident revelation of God's wrath on godlessness. It is heightened when people turn murderous and war against each other causing a lot of horror and death. Most miserably, they end up approving and encouraging each other to sin. This reality check is very hard to bear.

It seems like a hopeless passage, that leaves me feeling condemned and unclean. However, we have to remember Paul's amazing hope. (SLIDE Romans 1:13) Though surrounded by societies that blatantly lived apart from the knowledge of God he told the Romans, "I planned many times to come to you ... in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles." Paul was not indifferent toward the world of evil-doers, but eager to save them with the powerful gospel. He did wicked things when he was Saul, even killing the Lord's servants, but as Paul he shows us that Jesus will work with anyone to rescue the perishing people who seek for God when they hear the good news. We can remember his example and repent of doing those wicked things too. Thank God that his patience endures our long sinful lives with hope to gather the harvest as long as we live. Thank God Jesus has been prevented from coming for us so we may participate in his harvest for another day! Hallelujah!

Let's read the key verses one more time and pray. 18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.