

A WORLD WITHOUT FAITH

Romans 1:18-32

Key Verse: 1:18

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness....”

In the introduction of Romans we learned the key verse of the book: “The righteous will live by faith.” Most human beings want to be righteous. But all human beings are sinful. No one can say that he or she is righteous before the holy God. Then, how can we be righteous? God in his great mercy, sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God. Jesus died on the cross for our sins. Jesus paid the full price that justice demanded. When we accept Jesus by faith, God imputes his righteousness on us. This is God’s one-sided grace.

In today’s passage we learn that just as a righteousness from God is revealed in the gospel, so the wrath of God is being revealed against those who live without faith. God is merciful and loving, but God is also righteous. We must have a balanced view of God. We must realize the necessity of faith in God. We must see through the culture of our times and understand the world from God’s point of view.

First, the wrath of God is being revealed (18).

Look at verse 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 the wrath of God refers to God’s anger toward sin. This anger of God is not like the anger of an emotional person who blows up because he is having a bad day. It is an anger that is rooted in his righteousness. It is a fierce anger against evil. It is a relentless anger that will not subside until his righteousness has been satisfied. Of course, this wrath is not poured out upon men one by one as their sins deserve. If so, no one would be left alive on the earth. God is a shepherd. He does not punish our sins with a cause and effect principle. In character, God is rich in kindness, tolerance and patience (2:4). However, God reveals his wrath to educate us that he is righteous. Someday all the sins of all mankind will be punished with the full measure of justice (2:5). But in the meantime, God reveals his wrath sufficiently to help mankind realize he is righteous.

God reveals his wrath against the godlessness and wickedness of people. Godlessness is living without God. For example, there were the people of Noah’s day. Jesus said about them, “Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all.” (Lk 17:26-27). To God, the standard of marriage is always an important issue. In Noah’s time, men and women married according to their feelings and lustful desires without consulting God (Gen 6:2). This is practical godlessness. This godlessness provoked God’s wrath and resulted in God’s thorough judgment through the flood.

The people of Sodom and Gomorrah were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord (Gen 13:13). They succeeded in legalizing their unnatural lifestyles. But they could not escape God’s wrath. Genesis 19:24,25 says, “Then the Lord rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the Lord out of the heavens. Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, including all those living in the cities....” God used this event to teach his servant Abraham that he is not only the God of blessing, but also the God of righteousness.

Wickedness is complete evilness, including motive, thought and action. For example, Eli’s sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were wicked in the sight of God. They inherited the priestly office from their father. They should have been shepherds. But they abused their position to satisfy the desires of their flesh. They took offerings that belonged to God and ate the best parts for themselves. They wantonly indulged in immorality with girl servants. Finally, God put them to death with the sword of the Philistines (1Sa 2:34; 4:11). In David’s time, there was a wicked man named Nabal. David and his men protected Nabal’s flocks from bandits, so Nabal had an abundant wool harvest. At that time, David requested provisions for his men. Nabal rejected David’s request, pretending that he did not know David. Even Nabal’s wife Abigail called him wicked and a fool (1Sa 25:25). After the harvest festival, Nabal’s heart failed and he became like a stone. The Bible says, “The Lord struck Nabal and he died” (1Sa 25:38). 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 warns wicked people. It says, “Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”

People generally think they are clever. Many live godless and wicked lives, confident that they are getting away with something. But God is not blind. Does not he who made the eye see everything that men do? (Ps 94:9) God knows the secrets of men's hearts. God will bring about absolute justice in his time. In the meantime, God reveals his wrath against men's godlessness and wickedness. It is a warning from God that should not be taken lightly. Verse 18 says, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godless and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness...."

Second, people in the world deliberately reject God (18-20).

Verse 18 says that men suppress the truth by their wickedness. Here "the truth" is that God is the Creator of man and the world. Each person's life came from God. To suppress this truth is to ignore the existence of God. It is also to deny the relationship people have with God and its accompanying responsibilities. Men do this because they want to live a sinful life. In other words, people know that God exists, but they deliberately suppress this truth. They are like an ostrich that sticks his head in the ground, thinking he is hidden from view. We should not be fooled by sincere agnostics or sophisticated scientific explanations for unbelief. Men reject God because they want to sin. God knows that, and in their hearts, those who reject God know it, too.

Men suppress the truth by their wickedness. They say, "I committed sin last night. Today I am okay. Therefore, there is no God." One religion teacher at a major university made the following presentation: "God claims to be almighty. God claims to be good. There is evil in the world. These cannot all be true at the same time. Therefore, there is no God." In other words, men use their own wicked behavior as a basis for rejecting God's existence. Man's wickedness is really appalling.

To expose the fact that man's suppression of the truth is a deliberate act of wickedness, Paul mentions the undeniable evidence of God's existence. Look at verse 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." God is invisible. But, like the wind, the evidence of his presence is obvious and unmistakable. Paul mentions two invisible qualities of God: his eternal power and his divine nature.

God's eternal power is clearly manifested in the creation of man. God made man in the image of God. Many beautiful and extraordinary gifts are revealed in the souls of men which transcend time and space. These draw our attention heavenward, and to the conclusion that God gave them these gifts. There is one man who tries not to believe in God. But he recognizes divinity in someone's extraordinary musical talent.

Ecclesiastes 3:11a says, "He (God) has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men...." Man has a longing for eternity in his heart. Man is conscious of another reality beyond the physical world. So, many who do not really believe in God, believe in heaven. When one baseball player set a record for hitting, he claimed that his late father was watching from heaven. This man is one of the most sneaky and mean players in baseball history. If his father is like him, it is indeed a question if he is in heaven. However, this man insists that his father is in heaven looking down on him. Whether he is or not, we must admit that even this man has eternity in his heart. In Irian Jaya, which is part of Indonesia, there is a tribe of native people whom Missionary Don Richardson met in 1963. He found that they understood God's eternal power from nature. They saw the caterpillar go into his cocoon and come out as a beautiful butterfly. They understood that mortal people can have a new life after death. They believed that the One who can do this would come and visit them someday. They didn't need anyone to tell them that God's eternal power was revealed in nature. They could see it for themselves and understood it.

Regarding God's divine nature, we cannot say everything in this short message. But consider a few examples. There is a fish called a steelhead salmon. It is born in small rivers. After growing to sufficient size, it leaves the river and travels the oceans, sometimes throughout the whole world. After three years, these fish find their way back to the river where they were born. They jump up waterfalls and go through many obstacles to return to their birthplace. After laying their eggs, they die. Who taught them how to navigate the oceans? Or consider Canadian geese. At just the right time they all decide to fly south for the winter. They organize themselves in a traveling formation to maximize their flying power. They find their way to Florida for a nice winter vacation. Then they come back at the proper time, passing through Warren Park. Consider the spider. It crawls on eight legs. It wants to eat flies. But it cannot fly. So what does it do? It spins a web which catches flies. Then it can store them and snack on them

whenever it is hungry. Who taught these creatures how to spin a web? God plainly revealed his eternal power and divine nature in his creation. God plainly revealed the image of God in man. All men know that God exists. Those who deny God's existence are liars and they will face the wrath of God inevitably.

Third, pride and ingratitude are the root of sin (21).

Look at verse 21. "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened." Paul clearly established that men know God. Therefore, men are obligated to glorify God and thank God. Their failure to do so is a sin of omission. We must know that not glorifying God and not thanking God are serious sins in his sight. We must learn to detect and repent of these sins.

God is the Creator. Men are his creation, made for his glory. God gave his own life to man as a gift. God gave men the privilege of enjoying his world as stewards. So men should glorify God. Those who have musical talent should use it for the glory of God. Those who have strong bodies should use them for the glory of God. Those who have brilliant minds should use them for the glory of God. However, they refuse to do so. Instead, they glorify themselves with their God-given talents and gifts. Men have received everything from God. But they do not thank God. Pride and ingratitude are the root of sin. Pride and ingratitude are the beginning of total depravity of a human being.

The last part of verse 21 says, "...but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened." When a man is proud and unthankful toward God his mind becomes useless. He begins to meditate only on his sinful desires. He uses his creativity to do evil. He is trapped by the thought of death. At the same time, his heart becomes very dark. He loses meaning and direction. He dwells in sorrow, bitterness, regret, despair, hatred, and so on. Many become depression patients. Some become suicide candidates.

Fourth, they become fools (22-32).

Look at verse 22. "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools...." What is a fool? A fool is one who does not trade well. Foolish men who live without God make three foolish exchanges. In the first place, they exchange the glory of God for idols. Look at verse 23. "...and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles." Instead of worshiping the glorious, immortal God, people worship cheap images. When people worship God, they can grow in the image of God. They can taste the joy and peace of heaven. They can maintain God-given dignity as human beings. But when people worship idols, they degenerate to the animal level, or worse. They become miserable slaves of the flesh with no hope.

In the second place, they exchanged the truth of God for the devil's lie. Look at verse 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." God made man to contain the word of God's truth. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). This word of truth is Jesus himself. Jesus gives clear life direction, purpose and meaning. Jesus leads us to eternal life and the kingdom of God. When Jesus is in our hearts we are happy and sure about what we are doing. But when men deny God, they exchange the word of truth for a lie. It means that Satan comes into their hearts (Jn 8:44). Satan leads men to worship all manner of things, anything except God. Some worship money, some worship other people, some worship themselves. Idol worship results in moral and spiritual bankruptcy and complete shame.

In the third place, they exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. Look at verse 26b. "Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones." Women are the symbols of beauty in God's world. Their roles as wives and mothers are the bedrock of society and the strength of any nation or people. Women should have a beautiful dream of marriage and establish a godly home that produces good fruit for the generations to come. They should have a beautiful romance and marry in God's providence. But when they leave God out, even women become so perverse that they try to have romance with other women. It is too disgusting and degenerate to think about. What about men? Look at verse 27. "In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion." It is interesting that homosexuality provokes an immediate expression of God's wrath. Those who choose this lifestyle cannot escape God's wrath.

Fifth, God gives them over (24-28).

The phrase, "God gave them over" is repeated three times in verses 24-28. Look at verse 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." When men persist in enjoying their sinful desires and never repent in their hearts, God does not contend with them endlessly. God reaches a point where he says, "Okay, go your own way" (Gen 6:3). God allows men to live without him, withdrawing his protection from them. It is to punish them for their unrepentant attitude toward sin. But this punishment is not only punitive, it is also redemptive. God is like the father of the prodigal son. When his son determined to leave home and enjoy an irresponsible life of sin, his father let him go. He knew his son would suffer tremendously in the hard world without his father's love and protection. But he let him go. In the same way, God knows men will suffer a lot under the power of sin. But he gives them over to punish them and in the hope of restoration.

Sixth, they develop a godless society (28-32).

Look at verses 28-31. "Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. 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." This is a picture of hell. It is the result of removing God from society. This kind of society cannot but self-destruct. This kind of society came about when individual people abandoned God to live according to their sinful desires. We must not be deceived. People do not find lasting happiness without God. People are truly miserable when they live without faith. Look at verse 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."

In this passage we learned that when men live without faith, they degenerate into perverse creatures. They become miserable in their minds, hearts and souls. They make a society that resembles hell. They must bear the wrath and judgment of God. Therefore, we must live by faith. We must honor God as God. We must thank God. We must live for the glory of God. May God help us to do so.