

## SUPPRESSION OF TRUTH (The Wrath of God, Part I)

Romans 1:18–21

Key Verse: 1:21

“For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.”

Have you ever had major surgery? Not like having a wart removed, but something deeply invasive and life-altering? It’s quite an experience. For the past three weeks we’ve been soaking in the good news of Romans: the gospel is “the power of God to salvation,” “the righteousness of God revealed from faith for faith.” If you’re like me, you want to keep hearing these glorious truths. But as he begins the main body of his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul proceeds as a surgeon. He knows that to apply the cure—the gospel—we’ve got to accurately diagnose the disease. If we ignore the diagnosis, we can’t fully digest the cure. So Paul stops our celebration dead in its tracks. In just four verses so foundational to the Bible, he cuts to the heart of why the gospel is necessary, and asks us all to face a painful question: What is it in our human condition that makes the gospel so necessary? May God speak to us through his word.

Now we’re getting into the first major section of Romans. (It begins at 1:18 and ends at 3:20.) In this section Paul is out to prove that all human beings, both non-religious and religious, are actually living under the power of sin and, without a solution, are under God’s wrath. Today we study “The Wrath of God, Part I” by first exploring the heart of the issue, which we’ve entitled, “Suppression of Truth.” In these first four verses Paul zeroes in on the root cause of God’s wrath.

Read verse 18. Notice Paul uses the same verb here as in verse 17: “is revealed.” And by beginning verse 18 with the word “For,” he’s connecting the two verses. What does he mean by this? What he means is this: God’s righteousness is revealed in the gospel *because* his wrath is being revealed against all ungodliness. God’s glorious gift of salvation is good news only if we understand the bad news of our condemnation without it. Both the good news and the bad news are being revealed. Both God’s offer of salvation and his wrath need to be proclaimed boldly. For Paul, in preaching the gospel, people first need to know about God’s wrath against our sin.

Verse 18 tells us the nature of God’s wrath. First of all, justice is both intrinsic and essential to who God is. Yet his wrath is not something people naturally figure out; it “is revealed” in the preaching of the gospel. The words “from heaven” show that it is part of God’s full and sovereign oversight, aimed “against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.” Some see wrath as a sudden, violent, emotional outburst, but God’s wrath is not like that at all. Here, it’s a subtle yet active judgment based not on emotion but on seeing evil attitudes of heart and action. It’s different from impersonal karma. The wrath of God is the personal, constant, active opposition of the Creator to all evil against himself and against his creatures.<sup>1</sup> And this is just a glimpse into the final day of his righteous judgment (2:5). His wrath is part of his glory—the living God is not apathetic; in his love and justice he furiously opposes all sin. It’s why God, in his holiness, justice, great mercy and love, prepared another way, an incredible way: to offer his own righteousness to all ungodly, unrighteous people in the gift of his Son.

Verse 18 tells us that God looks at the world quite differently than we do. In Paul’s time, Rome and its vast empire looked glorious and impervious to any threat. Yet God saw it for what it really was: full of ungodliness and unrighteousness, and so, deserving of his wrath. Why? The last part of this verse explains: “...who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” This may sound like human beings are all just a bunch of liars. Maybe so. But we need to think more deeply about what this “truth” that’s getting suppressed is. The very next verse states it.

Let’s read verse 19. The plain truth is, God is real. Human “ungodliness” can mean many things, but in this context it means living as if God were not there. It’s acting as if we were independent and autonomous of the One who made us. It’s as shocking and silly as children living in a house their parents lovingly made for them, but acting as if their parents never existed. Suppressing the truth that God is living is so inexcusable, so unjust, it incurs God’s wrath.

Why is it so inexcusable? Let’s read verse 19 again. Paul says God has “made plain” to all human beings what can be known about him. Actually, in Greek it doesn’t say “plain to them” but literally “plain in them.” This reminds us of the image of God in all human beings (Gen. 1:26–27). After the Fall, God’s image in us was marred and deformed, as the later part of this chapter shows us. But his image is still there, in every human being. Though severely limited, this innate knowledge of God is partly why all people are held accountable for suppressing

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<sup>1</sup> See C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 108–112; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 74–77; Douglas Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2028), 111–113.

the truth that God is real. This is why we all need the gospel of Jesus: to recover our knowledge of God coming from his image in us (Col.3:10).

And while we're at it, let's do a quick overview of today's passage. Note that the first word in all these verses—18,19,20 and 21—is the word “For.” It's almost as if Paul were peeling back layers of an onion, unfolding his reasoning step by step to get at its core. First is God's wrath, *which* is due to suppression of truth, *which* is the fundamental truth that God is our Creator, *which* is “plain” and “clearly perceived” by everybody just in looking at creation around them. Suppressing the truth that God is real isn't a mistake; it's intentional, and grossly unjust, especially in our failure to honor him as God and give thanks to him. This arrogant ingratitude is at the root of all sin.

Now that we've got Paul's reasoning, let's look at a couple of major points he makes that really matter. Let's read verse 20. Paul says that all creation itself also reveals who God is. It's like looking at a painting, which tells us unmistakably that there's a painter. Let's read Psalm 19:1–4a: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.” So, what kind of Creator is he? Paul describes him here as the One with “eternal power” and a “divine nature.” How does creation reveal that?

First, creation reveals God's eternal power through its sheer scale, energy, and origin. Think about the world around you: The endless, vast cosmos. The explosive energy in a single star. The invisible forces that hold all matter together. This demonstrates a power that is immeasurable and can never run out. As we consider this, we cannot but acknowledge the infinite power of its Source. It simply could not have created itself. Bringing everything into existence out of nothing is the ultimate display of his eternal power. We also see his power in the unchanging laws of nature. The complex, dependable order—the laws of physics and biology—all imply a source of power that's stable, constant, and eternal.

Next, creation reveals God's divine nature. It's plain and clearly perceived in the complexity, beauty and provision built into creation. First, look at its intelligent design. It's seen in nature's intricate balance of ecosystems, the complexity of a single strand of DNA, and the precise orbits of the planets. Just gazing at it all, we see an orchestrated masterpiece. Then, there's gracious beauty and artistry all around us. We experience not only what's necessary for survival, but things that bring us joy: cool breezes, the warmth of the sun, stunning sunrises and sunsets, flowers, and a starry sky, just to name a few. This shows us how creative, personal, and desirous of beauty God is. Finally, we see

his divine nature in his provision and in human morality. God built into all of us a sense of moral law, justice and accountability, and these reflect his own divine nature as a just and moral God. And our constant provision of food, air, and water shows us God's benevolent and sustaining nature. He's not indifferent, but a generous Provider who sustains all his creation.<sup>2</sup>

And how do we humans respond to all this? Verse 18 says that by our unrighteousness we suppress this truth. We actively try to push it down under water so it can't be seen. Why? Because **we** want to be the center, in control. **We** want to be glorified. We clearly see who God is all around us, yet we suppress the truth that he's there, and so, we are without excuse. Let's now read verse 21. This verse is telling us that when we don't honor God as God, we suppress the truth. When we don't give thanks to God, we suppress the truth.

Our Creator is the one who gives us life and breath and everything (Acts 17:25). So it's only right and fitting that we, the creatures he made the whole world for, should honor him as God. Revelation 4:11 says, "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created." God is worthy of all our glory, honor and power. But we suppress this truth and choose to honor ourselves instead. It's the epitome of injustice. We give the Oscar for Best existence to flawed, finite creatures—ourselves—and treat the infinite, perfect Creator as irrelevant. A famous pastor called this "a crime of cosmic treason."<sup>3</sup>

Our failure to give thanks to the One who made and sustains us is arrogance disguised as autonomy. What does *that* mean? It means we're actively using God's provisions while claiming, "I earned this breath, I earned this food, I earned this success." It's delusional. We're taking what God provides while refusing to acknowledge him as the Giver. Our willful ingratitude toward God is the root of all our other sins.

And when we do that, what happens? Let's read verse 21b again: "...they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened." God reveals his wrath towards our arrogant ingratitude in this way: we immediately descend into inner darkness. "Futile thinking" means our minds become occupied with worthless things, unable to reach right conclusions about God, ourselves, others, or even reality itself. A darkened heart means losing our capacity to love

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<sup>2</sup> This distinction is vital: Natural Revelation (creation) makes humanity without excuse because it reveals God as Creator, and that revelation is sufficient to condemn us (1:20). But it is insufficient to save us. It doesn't reveal God's plan of redemption, the Father's love, or the means of salvation. That plan is revealed only in the Special Revelation of the Scriptures, and fully through the incarnation of his Son Jesus Christ (1:2–4, 16–17).

<sup>3</sup> R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2023), 116–117.

or trust anyone. With such a mind and heart, rebellion takes root in us. Because God made us all in his own image (Gen. 1:26–27), he longs for us to be wise and loving like him, and good stewards of his world. But once we lose our mind and heart to darkness, lose our basic humanity and integrity, we lose everything.

It's not just words—it's a devastating reality all around us. As we reject God, the foundation of all truth and goodness, our descent into futility begins. Our sense of meaning and purpose and our noble humanity get hollowed out. In the post-World War I era, the Nobel-Prize-winning poet T.S. Eliot wrote of modern humanity in his poem "The Hollow Men" (1925). He said, "We are the hollow men/We are the stuffed men/Leaning together/Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!" It aptly describes modern people as spiritually dead, with futile thinking and a darkened heart, passively waiting in a wasteland, unable to act, believe, or even feel strongly, with no moral anchor. It's the condition of the soul that rejects its Creator, leading to the collapse of all morality. Yet God offers the gift of his righteousness through his Son Jesus Christ even to such human beings. Only his grace can regenerate our mind and heart and bring us back to life as human beings, capable of loving him, loving others, and living with real purpose.

Today's brief but foundational verses have some powerful lessons. **First** of all, who God is. God is not a mere disappointed Father; he is our Offended Creator. He may seem powerless when he doesn't bring swift punishment. But his wrath against sin is real, both now, in its consequences within us, and in the future. **Second**, Paul says all of us are "without excuse." Our habit of ignoring God is totally indefensible. Nobody can ignore God without consequences. All of us, whoever we are, are accountable to God (3:19; 14:12). **Third**, our lives are to be full of thanks to God. After we accept the gospel, God wants our entire lives to be a clear testimony of thanksgiving. As we thank him, we grow more deeply rooted in Christ (Col. 2:6–7). We thank him for his grace not just when we feel like it, but by faith, both in regular, active worship together and in personal gratitude. By faith we thank him in all circumstances (1 Thess. 5:18), acknowledging God's sovereignty and goodness to us regardless of our immediate situation. **Fourth**, this passage warns us about futile pursuits. If we get engrossed in them, we're spending our mind and heart on pointless things that produce no lasting good. What we think we know, and what we love, need to be rooted, first and foremost, and every day, in our Creator God. **Fifth**, this passage reminds us of the urgency of the gospel. We all need to urgently accept it for ourselves, and then share it passionately with others, so that we and they can come out from under God's wrath and be healed and restored in Christ.

So Paul has accomplished a brief surgical task. He's shown us, painfully, the root of all human failure. It's not our environment, but the profound, arrogant sin in our own hearts: our refusal to honor our Creator and give thanks to him. All

of us, the most religious or the most secular, are without excuse. The evidence of God is all around us. The diagnosis of a darkened heart is written in our own lives. What will we do with this truth? If we choose to keep suppressing it and clinging to the fantasy of our own autonomy, our end will be a continuing descent into futility, darkness, and the just wrath of God. Yet to all of us “hollow” men and women, God is offering today the gift of his righteousness in his Son. We can stop running and pretending. We can confess our sins to him and receive the life and righteousness of Christ. Only he can bring us back to life and make us capable of truly loving and trusting him, and truly loving and trusting others. May God help us see our desperate need for his grace to heal our minds and hearts. May God fill us with real honor and thanks to him through a living relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus.