

The Wrath of God
 Romans 1:14-25 (NASB)
 Dan Hoffman
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Nikki was driving as we pulled up to the red light at 17th and Victoria. It was a beautiful blue sky Saturday afternoon and we had nowhere important to be. As the light turned green the two cars in front of us sped off and we followed them accelerating moderately as looking ahead there was another red light approaching at 15th.

As we entered the intersection about three seconds behind the car in front of us we noticed a very red faced gentleman facing us and waiting to turn left in his pickup truck. As we passed, while we couldn't hear him with our windows up we had no difficulty reading his lips or interpreting the one fingered salute he energetically waved in our direction. As we cleared the intersection he squealed his tires and roared angrily up 17th. Obviously the three seconds we had held him up had put him significantly behind schedule.

This morning is our 7th sermon in our attributes of God series where we have been looking at who God has revealed Himself to be. And this morning we will be turning our gaze to examine His wrath.

Something we don't often spend much time thinking about – perhaps even an aspect of God we as Christians are embarrassed by. This morning I hope to demonstrate that the wrath of God is a good thing.

So please turn with me to Romans chapter 1 verses 14-25 – it is on page 796 in your pew Bibles if you didn't bring your own. Today I will be reading from the NASB version for reasons that I will explain as we go along.

[Read Romans 1:14-25]

[Let's pray.]

1.) So “What is the wrath of God?”

Like many of the words we have been looking at in this series, wrath is not a word we use all that often. In modern English “wrath” conjures up a picture of anger raised to comical proportions. Like that crazy man road-raging at 17th and Victoria, the extreme anger he expressed for the minimal offence received was hilarious – we laughed about it for months!

But in the Bible the word “wrath” doesn't describe anger being raised to comical heights –it describes something very different. Pastor John Piper gives “wrath” this definition:

“the wrath of God is God’s settled anger toward sin expressed in the repayment of suitable vengeance on the guilty sinner.”¹

Now there is a lot in that definition. But it can be broken into three parts. First wrath always comes in response to humanity’s sin – God only gets angry at sin and sin always makes Him angry. Second, it is a response of “settled anger” which means God’s wrath is a conscious and thought-through response to sin rather than an immediate emotional reaction like flying off the handle. And finally this conscious, thought-through response is not just a feeling, but it’s an action – it is expressed as punishment suitable to the crimes of sin.

And that is the definition of wrath that we are going to use today. The wrath of God is *God’s settled anger toward sin expressed in the repayment of suitable vengeance on the guilty sinner*

2.) Now I want to turn to our text and three questions that are going to lead through it this morning. The first one is: “What is God’s Wrath Revealed against?”

Look with me at verse 18

[Read Romans 1:18]

First by way of context it is important to note that this section of text comes at the beginning of the book of Romans. And in Romans Paul lays out his longest explanation of what the Gospel is. And he starts in chapter 1 by laying out the reasons why we should even care about the Gospel. And right after his introduction we get these verses – the reason we need to hear the Gospel, Paul says “is because God’s wrath has been revealed.”

Now, this is very different from the way we present the Gospel today. Today when we introduce people to Jesus we usually say things like “become a Christian to make your life better” or “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.”

We start presenting Jesus like this because we want to get people in the door and let them figure out sin and repentance later. But this isn’t the gospel, and this isn’t where Paul starts.

John Piper’s definition of wrath said it was “the repayment of suitable vengeance on the guilty sinner.” The Gospel tells us the wrath of God fits the crime of our sin.

But why start here? Won’t this turn people off?

¹ John Piper <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/gods-wrath-vengeance-is-mine-i-will-repay-says-the-lord>

The answer quite simply is that nothing else in the Gospel makes any sense until you understand the wrath of God. The incarnation of Christ is pointless, the cross is meaningless, discipleship is a waste of time until you understand God's wrath which, because of our sin, justly calls for the eternal damnation of all people including Mother Theresa, Billy Graham and you and me – we deserve it.

Romans 6:23 says:

“For the wages of sin is death”

Brothers and sisters if we believe this we must stop preaching Jesus without first preaching the wrath of God.

And that is because when God encounters sin in His creation He has only one response, and that is a radical revulsion. Sin makes God puke. Listen to the words of Jesus as He warns a group of Christians who had allowed the sin of hypocrisy to enter their church when He said:

I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot.... So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. (Rev 3:15-16)

The stench of sin sickens God. And the reason it makes Him sick is, as we established several weeks back: God is holy. He is totally unlike everything else in creation.

My dad has worked shift work at the oil refinery here in town for more than thirty years. And that shift work has meant that he was only able to make it to church half the time. I remember as a kid, however, that every now and then something special would be going on at church and dad would come straight from work to whatever was happening – he didn't want to miss it.

It was always great to have dad around at these special occasions but his presence there made me realize something. Usually when dad came home from work and I had been playing outside in the barn or with the dog I didn't notice how he smelled, but sitting in church in my Sunday best made me painfully aware that, as we sometimes say, dad smelled like money. My cleanliness made dad's dirtiness evident.

God of course takes this to the extreme. God is holy as we have already established, He is totally separate from everything else in the universe. And God's holiness means that the stench of sin that lingers on human skin causes Him to vomit.

He must punish it. He must get rid of it, because He can not stand to be with it, that is who He is. And God's wrath is the vehicle He uses to expunge sin from His presence.

Notice in verse 18 that God's wrath is revealed against sin – the ungodliness and unrighteousness of people. And it goes on.

God's wrath is revealed against people "who suppress the truth in unrighteousness."

Paul says people suppress the truth of God, they refuse to acknowledge it – they rebel against it.

All sin is ultimately rebellion against God. When we sin we say to God I think I know better than you what is best for me.

Verse 19 continues tells us how people do this.

[Read Romans 1:19-21]

While the text admits that God is invisible as verse 20 says, this invisibility doesn't allow people to claim the defense of ignorance because God has made His eternal power and divine nature clearly visible through creation.

Simply people have rebelled against this revelation. They have closed their minds and verse 21 tells us that in spite of standing knee deep in the evidence these people do two things; they do not *glorify Him as God* nor do they *give Him thanks*.

These two things are what God demands from His creation. We must worship Him by giving Him glory and thanks because He is worthy of it – He alone is God in the universe.

Not that long ago I was listening to Anna Marie Tremonti from the CBC feature a scientist who was talking about the Multiverse. You, of course, have heard of the universe which includes all the galaxies and all the stars in all of space. But the universe we have poses a problem. The problem this scientist was saying is that in spite of how many billion galaxies and trillion stars we have in our universe the math required to allow us to evolve by chance from nothing requires more stars than our universe holds. And therefore the theory of the Multiverse was born.

The idea here is that our entire universe is but one small speck in an infinite pool of universes and then this allows the math of evolution to work.

At this point the CBC show host asked, "isn't it easier just to believe in God?" To which the scientist responded "We don't need a Creator for Creation" and in fact there isn't enough evidence to support one.²

Our culture is full of people who rebelliously, close their eyes to the truth of God and refuse to give Him glory or thanks. And God tells us His wrath is revealed against people who refuse to give Him what He is due. And that's our first question "what is God's wrath revealed against?"

² <http://www.cbc.ca/books/2012/01/physicist-lawrence-krauss-on-a-universe-from-nothing.html>

3.) Let's look now at our second question: "What does God's Wrath Look Like?"

In the Bible we get two pictures of what God's wrath looks like. The first picture talks about the coming eternal punishment of hell that will be initiated on "God's day of wrath" and we get this in chapter 2 verse 5. It reads:

Because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself **in the day of wrath** and revelation of the righteous judgment of God (Rom 2:5)

When that day arrives there will be no escaping or appeasing God's wrath. In Matthew 25 Jesus tells us that on that day He will separate the sheep from the goats; to the sheep He will say "enter into eternal life with Me, but to the goats we get this message from the lips of Jesus:

Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (Matt 25:41)

Now I happen not to like this at all, but when we come to the Scriptures we don't have the luxury of choosing what we like and discarding the rest, we either accept God as He has revealed Himself to us, or we reject Him. And He has revealed that His wrath has an eternal aspect to it. But interestingly our text today isn't talking about that kind of wrath.

Look with me at verses 22 through 25.

[Read Romans 1:22-25]

In these verses Paul describes a second form of God's wrath – His present wrath acted out upon people who willfully suppress the truth.

Notice a couple of key words here. The word "exchanged" comes up twice, once in verse 23 and once in verse 25. Paul says these people exchange God's glory for something else – for an idol.

The fact is that all people give glory and praise to something. Whether that is our intellect or our jobs or our families or ourselves – people are worshipping beings. The only question remains what will we give ourselves to, will we give ourselves in worship to verse 23's Incorruptible God of truth, or will we give ourselves to something else. And Paul says people who refuse to give glory and thanks to God exchange the glory that He is worthy of and give it to some created thing. Verse 25 says they worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator."

Throughout this series we have talked about idolatry. And we have defined it as two things. First as thinking thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him and thereby creating Him in our own image in our imaginations. And second it is giving the ultimate place in our lives to anything or anyone besides God.

Both these forms of idolatry are sin and these verses tell us that when we worship idols like this what we are doing is making a foolish exchange. We give God's glory to something else.

And between these two exchanges in verse 24 we find out what God's wrath looks like – not His ultimate wrath, not His eternal wrath, but the wrath that He pours out on people here and now.

And you might be surprised by this. It's different than we expect.

Every time there is a natural disaster that claims lives like the Tsunami in Japan or Hurricane Katrina down in New Orleans you always hear of some crazy Christians claiming that God is punishing people for their actions with these disasters.

And when I hear this it makes me sick because the Bible does not support that kind of a statement at all. The simple fact is that God's wrath does not punish people with sickness or poverty or natural disasters here and now – He doesn't have to, instead His wrath allows us to punish ourselves.

Look at verse 24:

[Read Romans 1:24]

Because people made the great exchange, giving God's glory to something or someone else, the Bible tells us that God "gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity".

God says if you will not worship me and give glory to me then that's fine, pursue something else that will make you happy.

C.S. Lewis says **"There are only two kinds of people... those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says... 'Thy will be done.'"**³

Weird! God just lets them get away with it. How is that wrath?

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Here is where we have to return to God's goodness that we discussed three weeks ago where we said God wants good for us, but the good He wants is not our happiness but our ultimate joy and fulfillment. And the only way we can have ultimate joy and fulfillment is when we get Him.

Now we have to be careful here... this doesn't mean our happiness is our motivation for glorifying God. No, our happiness is just a side effect of glorifying God.

³ C.S. Lewis "The Great Divorce" (Harper Collins: San Francisco), 1973, pg 72.

Sometimes people say “I will be God centered as long as I am sure that God is centered on me.” I’ll focus my attention on God as long as God focuses His attention on me. But what that really means is I will make God, God in my life as long as God makes me God in His life.

Friends, the only thing in the universe that anyone, including God can center on without it becoming idolatry is God – He alone is worthy. And that is why His primary concern in this text is that His creatures give Him the glory and thanks that He is worthy of. Its not about us and our happiness, it is about Him and His glory.

But, the side effect to living completely for the glory of God is, because we were created for this purpose, when we do what we were created to do we are truly happy.

And the opposite is true as well.

Anything in life that we exchange the glory of God for, things we think will bring us joy like family, or health, or financial security, or sexuality – all good things, but when we give ourselves to the pursuit of these things above all we will not end up happy because we were not created to worship these things.

Here is the irony, God’s wrath here and now, means giving us over to our idols.

Even in His wrath God respects our free will. He never strong-arms us into worshipping Him. Instead, if we tell Him we want to worship His stuff rather than Him He takes His hands off and gives us what we want - things that will never make us happy. That’s what God’s wrath here and now looks like.

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4.) And that leads us to our last question today “What is the Purpose of God’s Wrath?”

And here we have to return to the first few verses of our text. Look at verse 15

[Read Romans 1:15]

The Gospel Paul is eager to preach is the topic of his entire letter. And so, in verses 17 and 18, he lays out what the Gospel accomplishes for us and why it is necessary.

In verse 17 Paul says, in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed. The Gospel is God’s gift of righteousness that He gives to humanity. His righteousness, Jesus’ righteousness, that He puts on us like clothing. Righteousness means “right-relatedness” or right relationship. While our relationship with Him starts out broken, when God puts His righteousness on us He makes the relationship between Him and us right.

But He has to make it right because it *starts* out wrong.

Verse 18 tells us something else is revealed in the gospel – God’s wrath. Do you see the connection? And here is where the NIV lets us down.

It leaves out a small word at the beginning of verse 18, the word “for”

And “for” is important here because it is a linking word that connects Paul’s argument together. Actually, if you look at verses 15-18 you will see Paul uses this word four times:

Vs 15 starts Paul’s thought, it says “I’m eager to preach the gospel to you. Why?

Vs 16 says “For I’m not ashamed of it.” Why not?

Vs 16 continues “For it is the power of God for salvation.” How does it do that?

Vs 17 says “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed.” Why do we need that?

Vs 18 says “For the wrath of God is revealed.”

God’s wrath in verse 18 is the reason God’s gift of righteousness in vs 17 is the Gospel – good news.

Romans 5 tells us:

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!” (Rom 5:8-9)

Without God’s wrath revealed against us there is no need for us to come to God for salvation.

But second God’s wrath also proves that He loves us. Really? How does God’s wrath prove He loves us? Isn’t wrath the opposite of love?

Not really, the opposite of love is not anger; the absolute opposite of love is indifference which means you don’t care at all what happens to someone.

And sometimes anger is the best way to show love.

Pastor Mark Buchannan, tells a story about a young boy who had a younger brother with downs syndrome. His brother was often bullied at school and one time he saw him surrounded by a group of older boys who were making fun of him and beginning to ruff him up. At first he was scared, but as he watched his brother begin to cry he ran to his defense, pushing into the circle of bigger boys, and in a moment of furry he took on the crowd like a mighty warrior and whipped every one of those boys.⁴

For him to have stayed back would have been cowardice, but to come to his brother’s defense was evidence of his love.

⁴ Adapted from Barton Priebe’s sermon “God’s Wrath” June 13, 2010.

In the same way God's wrath proves He loves us. Ecclesiastes 12:14 tells us

God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.
(Ecc 12:14)

The difference is that God isn't anything like a small boy defending his younger brother from bullies, He is the Creator of the Cosmos and the defense He will bring to the children He loves and the justice He will bring to evil will be complete.

Friends, faith in God's coming wrath to right the wrongs in the world means we can put our trust completely in a God who loves us.

Romans 12:19 tells us:

"Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay.'" (Rom 12:19)

And that is the purpose of God's wrath. First it makes the good news of the Gospel good news. And second it gives us confidence in the face of the injustice we see in the world. Sometimes to stand up against it, and other times to trust that in the end God's wrath will make all wrongs right.

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As we draw to a close consider with me where faith in the wrath of God calls us today. It must once again lead us to the foot of the cross to give the glory and thanks to Jesus that verse 21 demands.

We too are worthy of God's wrath, but because we have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus all the wrath of God we deserve has already been taken away and paid for. Amen? And this must lead us back to a place of worship and thanks.

Would you please stand and join me in praying a prayer of worship and thanks for what God has done for us.

[Let's pray this together]

With joy we praise you, gracious God,
for You created heaven and earth,
and You put Your image within us.
Thank You for Jesus Christ, our Lord,
who by his life, death and resurrection
delivered us from your wrath and made right our relationship with You.
Therefore we join with all creation to proclaim Your glory and give You thanks.
You alone are worthy.
Amen! and Amen!