

**"Our Need Of Salvation"**  
**Sermon Series on *The Fifth Gospel* #3**  
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**(Rm. 1:18-32)**

**Introduction.**

There was once a pastor who was in the hospital, and the clerk of Session went to see him. (Obviously, this was before Covid-19!) When the clerk arrived, he presented the pastor with a get-well card, and said, "I've got some good news and some bad news." The pastor asked, "What's the good news?" The clerk replied, "The Session voted to send you this get-well card." "Well, what's the bad news?" asked the pastor. The clerk answered, "The bad news is the vote was 9-8."

In the gospel of Jesus Christ there is some good news, and there is also some bad news. The good news is that God loves us and has made a way of salvation for us in Christ that will lead to the reconciliation and restoration of all things, and He invites us to join Him on His mission of love. But the bad news is that we're all sinful, and we need a Savior.

In order to fully understand the gospel of Jesus Christ, we first have to hear the bad news about our spiritual condition before we can fully appreciate the good news that is offered in Christ. We need to hear the honest diagnosis from the Great Physician before we can fully appreciate the cure God offers us. And until we know how deep we are in debt; we can't fully appreciate just how wonderful it is that the debt we owe has been paid in full.

At this point in Paul's letter to the Romans, before the apostle goes any further in explaining God's way of salvation, he wants to make sure his readers understand why the gospel is so urgently needed. This explanation begins here in Romans 1, and it continues all the way through the third chapter.

Paul begins this section in his letter by talking about God's wrath, which isn't a very popular subject to talk about these days. This morning I want to ask and answer three questions as it relates to what the passage says about the subject: 1) What is the wrath of God? 2) Who will experience it? and 3) How will God's wrath be expressed?

**I. What Is the Wrath of God?**

Paul begins the passage by writing, "*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness,*" (1:18).

I have to confess that when I was studying this passage in preparation for this message, I struggled with this whole idea of the wrath of God. It isn't a comfortable word, is it? When we hear the phrase "the wrath of God," we tend to think of fire and brimstone and judgment. We think of sinners in the hands of an angry God. You and I would much rather talk about God's

love rather than His wrath, but the wrath of God is an important subject we need to understand.

And here's why. (And I'm indebted to Tim Keller for some of these ideas.) The problem is that if you want a loving God, you also have to have a God of wrath and judgment. Think about it. People who are loving get angry, not in spite of their love, but *because* of it. In fact, the more deeply you love someone, the angrier you will get when anyone harms them. Have you ever noticed that?

When you see someone being harmed or abused, you get mad, especially if you love them. Your senses of love and justice are activated together, not in opposition to each other. If you see someone hurting another person, and you don't get angry, then it's because you don't really care. Either you're too self-absorbed, or you're too cynical, or it doesn't matter to you. However, the more loving you are, the angrier you will become at whatever harms the person you love. And the greater the harm, the more resolute your opposition will be. You and I don't often connect God's justice with His love, but His wrath is a function of His love and goodness.

There are many misconceptions people have about God's wrath. For example, we need to understand that God's wrath isn't like human anger which is emotional and given to whims. His wrath isn't flippant, and it isn't carried away by passion. As Becky Pippert writes, "God's wrath isn't a cranky disposition but His settled opposition to the cancer...which is eating out the insides of the human race He loves with His whole being."<sup>1</sup> It is without sin or guile.

There are times when it's right to be angry. For example, we should be angry when priests and other people in positions of trust sexually abuse children. We should be angry about the problem of human trafficking in this country. We should be angry about the economic and educational divide that exists in this country and the fact that one in five children in our country don't have enough food to eat. And on this MLK weekend, we should be angry when violence strikes down people of color like when the young man who was a white supremacist killed the nine African American members of the Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, SC. If we aren't angry when things like this happens, then something is wrong with us.

There are times when it's right to be angry. And so it is that God's anger and His wrath, which are holy and just, are kindled against the sin of the world. As one author put it, God's wrath is His utter intolerance of whatever degrades and destroys in this world. He hates sin the way a parent hates a disease that is taking the life of a sick child. Do you see why the wrath of God is tied to His love?<sup>2</sup>

Many Christians are embarrassed by God's wrath. We're uncomfortable with the idea, and we try to domesticate God. We want to tame Him and take the bite out of Him, but God cannot and will not be house broken. He is forever breaking out of the little boxes into which we try to put Him, and He is His own Person!

Some people try to draw a dichotomy between the God of judgment in the OT and the God of love in the NT, but such a distinction cannot be made. Both the Old and New Testaments reveal a God of judgment *and* a God of love, a God of wrath and a God who is merciful. Both testaments present the holiness and the love of God together. For example, it was out of love that the Lord delivered the people of Israel from their bondage in Egypt, but He also held them accountable for their idolatry with the golden calf. And in the NT Jesus talked about judgment as well as the love of God, and He actually said more about hell than He did about heaven. Both judgment and mercy, wrath and love, are notes that are sounded in the chorus of

Scripture. Love without justice is sentimental. Justice without love has no power to move or change the stubborn heart. And the cross is the only place where the picture is brought into clear focus. God's justice and His love come together in Jesus' sacrifice for us sinners.

Some people say that Jesus' death on the cross was just a way to show us how much God loves us, and it didn't have anything to do with His justice or His wrath. Roger Nicole was one of my professors in seminary, and once said this in response that notion: "If you and a friend are standing in front of a bonfire, and your friend turns to you and says, "Let me show you how much I love you," and then all of a sudden your friend throws himself into the fire and dies, would you say, "Behold, how he loved me"? No. You'd say, "What kind of crazy drug was he on that would drive him to do a stupid thing like that? How foolish." However, if you're standing in front of a burning house and your child is in the house, and your friend runs into that house and saves your child but dies in the process, that's when you say, "Behold, how he loved us."

If Jesus Christ died on the cross and you and I aren't in any trouble, if we don't have to be concerned about the wrath of God at all, and if we aren't on our way to an eternity separated from God because of sin, then Jesus' death isn't a sign of love. It's an outrageous, foolish, and tragic mistake. However, if on the cross Jesus drank to the dregs the cup of God's wrath for our salvation, which is what He said He was doing for you and for me, then it's the greatest act of loving sacrifice in human history. If you can't believe in a God of wrath, then you can't really believe in or truly appreciate His love either, at least not in the way the Bible talks about the love of God.

## **II. Who Will Experience the Wrath of God?**

Paul writes, "*The wrath of God is being revealed against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness*" (1:18). There are three groups of people that Paul lists in verse 18 who will experience God's wrath. They are those who don't believe in God, those who persist in sin, and those who suppress the truth.

**A. Those who don't believe in God.** Paul uses some fancy words in this passage which need definition to help us understand what he's saying. The first one is the word "godlessness" which means someone who denies the existence of God. Essentially it is atheism. Paul explains what he means by the word in verses 21-23 when he writes, "*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*" (1:21). Godless people don't believe God exists, so they don't know God, they don't glorify the Lord, and they don't thank Him. They think that what they have in life, they have gotten for themselves by their own strength, ingenuity, and ability. They're self-sufficient, independent, and the Bible says they are lost.

Paul goes on to say that God has revealed Himself in creation so that people are without excuse when they say God doesn't exist. The visible aspects of creation reveal the invisible characteristics of the nature of God – His majesty, His eye for detail, His creativity, His power, His tenderness. It's possible to tell something about a person from what they create. For example, when we listen to a concerto by Bach or look at a painting by Rembrandt, we learn something about who these great artists were. In a similar way it's possible to learn something about God from studying the world He created. And Paul says the result is that people who deny the existence of God are without excuse.

**B. Those who persist in sin.** "Wickedness" is the second word Paul uses here, and it simply means "moral evil." A person who is "wicked" in the biblical sense of the word is one who has a bent toward evil in a way that is destructive, volatile, and immoral, and verses 26-32 in our passage describe this kind of behavior. The person who persists in sin and refuses to repent doesn't necessarily write off God's existence, but they foolishly think that they can do whatever they want and God won't punish them for the things they do. They think they're getting away with it. However, the Bible says that one day there will be a reckoning, and God will eventually respond with justice and righteousness, and He will hold people accountable.

The list of sins in verses 26-32 includes greed, envy, deceit, and gossip, as well as sexual immorality in all its expressions. The univocal teaching of Scripture is that sex is best expressed and enjoyed in the context of marriage between a man and a woman, and whenever we go against the way God intended the world to be from the beginning, we only hurt ourselves. When you read this list of sinful behaviors in this passage, it brings God's judgment close to home, because the moral flaws of our own society aren't very far from that of the Roman world in which Paul lived. And if we aren't careful as a nation, we will go the way of Rome, too, which historians have demonstrated was destroyed not from without, but from within because of moral collapse.

**C. Those who suppress the truth.** NT scholar Richard Lenski once wrote, "Whenever the Truth starts to exert itself and make [people] feel uneasy about their behavior, they [tend to] hold it down, [and they] suppress it. Some drown its voice by rushing into more immorality, and others by argument and denial."<sup>3</sup> All of us have had this experience before. For example, have you ever compounded the sin of telling a lie by telling another lie to cover up the first one? Or have you ever tried to rationalize or justify your actions by thinking, "Well, everyone else is doing it. They'll never miss it. And besides, I deserve this"? Sometimes we don't want to admit that we're wrong, and we live in denial of the reality of our own behavior. Paul writes in verse 25, "*They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator....*" The result was that people began to call good evil and evil good.

You and I are living in a world today in which virtue is made fun of, truth is called error, and moral purity is labeled naïve. Good is called evil, and evil is called good. What are coming to in this country? The truth of Christianity brings out into the open and into the light of God's revelation the very ways in which we think and live that aren't aligned with His desires or design, and in Christ God calls us to account and He urges us to come clean, to be honest about our sin, and to suppress the truth no longer.

### **III. How Will the Wrath of God Be Expressed?**

The metaphors which Scripture uses to describe God's judgment – an eternal lake of fire, utter darkness, and separation – all describe the void and emptiness which a life apart from Christ entails. Think of everything that is good, beautiful, lovely, and full of joy, and remove all that from the equation, and you have an existence without God for all eternity.

The Bible says that the wrath of God will be revealed in two ways. First, it will be revealed in the future on the Day of Judgment. One day all of us will appear before the throne of heaven, and we'll have to give an account for what we've done with our lives. And those who

do not know Christ will personally be held accountable for their sin, having never trusted in Jesus' death as their payment for the penalty of their sin.

Second, in this passage here in Romans Paul says that the wrath of God is also being revealed already in our present day as God allows sin to run riot in some measure. The Lord allows us to go our own way and do our own thing if we want to, and we see the consequences of this all around us. In verses 21-32 Paul describes what happens when people forget God, when they do their own thing, and when they suppress the truth about Him.

If you break the laws of agriculture, the harvest will fail. If you break the laws of architecture, the building will collapse. If you break the laws of health, the body will suffer. And if you break the moral laws of God, you will experience spiritual brokenness. Your life will eventually fall apart. God's love is a *tough love*, and He will allow us to go to the far country if we want to. But we see the effects of what happens when we do that in the brokenness of the world all around us. And this is part of the way in which God reveals His judgment to us even now. If you make your bed, you're going to have to sleep in it.

### **Conclusion.**

The bad news of the gospel is a tough subject to talk about, but it's part of the whole gospel of God's love in Christ which is very good news. I haven't been able to touch on all that I would like to say about this passage. This will have to do for now. As I close, I want to quote something the late British author and pastor John Stott has written: "Nothing keeps people away from Christ more than their inability to see their need of Him or their unwillingness to admit it. As Jesus put it: 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.' He was defending against the criticism of the Pharisees His policy of fraternizing with 'tax collectors and sinners.'

"He did not mean by His epigram about the doctor that some people are righteous, so that they do not need salvation, but that some people think they are. In that condition of self-righteousness they will never come to Christ. For just as we go to the doctor only when we admit that we are ill and cannot cure ourselves, so we will go to Christ only when we admit that we are sinners and cannot save ourselves."<sup>4</sup>

In the days of the pioneers, when people saw that a prairie fire was coming, do you know what would they do? Since not even the fastest of horses could outrun the spreading fire, the pioneers would take a match and burn the grass in a designated area around them. Then they would take their stand in the burned-out area and be safe from the threatening prairie fire. As the roar of the flames approached, they wouldn't be afraid. Even as the fire surged around them there was no fear because fire had already passed over the place where they stood.

When the judgment of God comes, there is only one place that is truly safe. Nearly two thousand years ago the wrath of God was poured out on Jesus the Son of God on the cross of Calvary, and He took the fire of God's wrath that should have fallen upon us. Today, if you and I take our stand by that cross and put our trust in Jesus, we will be safe there for all time and eternity. Put your faith in Christ today. Only the person who understands the reality of God's wrath is fully overwhelmed by the magnitude of His grace and His love in Christ who died for you and me. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Pippert, *Hope Has Its Reasons*, chapter 4.

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<sup>2</sup>A. W. Tozier. Leadership-Vol. 1, #3.

<sup>3</sup>William Lenski, *Commentary on Romans*, p. unknown.

<sup>4</sup>John R.W. Stott, *Romans*, p. 67.