

## 13. The Book of Romans 1:18-20

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### *Paul's Epistle to the Romans*

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As we mentioned last time, we have finished Paul's opening salutation and his personal introduction of himself and his ministry (covering 1:1-15)—and also verses 16 and 17 which set forth the theme and thesis of the epistle.

Last week we entered into the main body of the epistle which runs from 1:18 through 15:13.

This first section (1:18-3:20) falls under the heading of **"Condemnation"** because in it Paul wants to prove that the whole world, apart from Christ, is condemned by God.

Condemnation is a judicial term denoting that fallen man is guilty before a holy, righteous God of violating His laws and condemned (sentenced) to spend eternity in hell for crimes against Him.

That is why Paul begins it with the words, **"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all who are ungodly..." (1:18)**—and ends with: **"Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight..." (3:20)**

Here Paul is acting like a prosecuting attorney who starts by proving that the pagan (the ungodly) is condemned (guilty) before a holy God. He then moves to the moralist to show that those who think they're right with God because they live 'moral' lives are hypocrites and guilty.

Finally, he turns his focus on the religionist (in this case those who embrace Judaism) to show that keeping the Law of God (religion) will not save either.

### **The verdict—all apart from Christ are guilty and condemned!**

- Why is it so important that Paul begins the main body of this epistle by proving the whole world apart from Jesus is condemned?

It's important because before people will see their need for a Savior, they must first be made to see themselves as guilty sinners—which is why Paul starts this section with the **"wrath of God" (verse 18)**

I mean, think about it—the *bad* news has to come before the *good* news—the bad news prepares a person's heart for the good news. The bad news is that we are all fallen sinners infected with the terminal disease of sin—and yet, most people don't realize they've been infected with this disease.

Let's put it this way—say you have a very serious physical disease that, if left untreated, will kill you—and yet you didn't realize you were infected with this disease.

Say I recognized the symptoms you have—because I too was once infected with that same disease. So, imagine I came to you and told you that I had a cure for the disease you were infected with—a miracle cure, the only one in the world that could save your life.

You'd would probably say to me, *"Get lost, I don't have a disease, I feel fine* (people tend to live in denial with regard to bad news)." As long as you were convinced that you were healthy you wouldn't appreciate the cure I was offering to you because—in your mind, you wouldn't see your need for it.

But now let's imagine that I began to tell you the symptoms of this disease—and as I did you began to realize that you *did* have those symptoms. If I could eventually convince you that you were, in fact, infected with this deadly disease—then how do you think you'd appreciate the cure I was offering?

You'd probably line up for hours or days or do whatever it took to get this miracle cure!

Yet when it comes to a cure for sin (a terminal and eternally deadly disease)—most people in our culture are ambivalent at best when you try to tell them they are infected with the disease of sin and the only cure is the blood of Jesus Christ applied through faith.

Again, the problem is that most people don't *feel* sick—they don't *feel* like they have a problem—they can't feel the wrath of God abiding on them.

Why is that? Because they'll tell you, *"I'm a good person. I do (fill in the blank) good things—sinful (sick) people don't do that! Besides, look at how my life is being blessed. God doesn't bless sinners like I'm being blessed—I'm fine!"*

Listen, just like a doctor can only help those who *realize* they're sick and seek help—so too, Jesus, the Great Physician, can only help those who *know* they're sinners and therefore in *need* of a Savior.

**Mark 2:15–17 (NKJV)**

<sup>15</sup> Now it happened, as He was dining in *Levi's* house, that many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many, and they followed Him. <sup>16</sup> And when the scribes and Pharisees saw Him eating with the tax collectors and sinners, they said to His disciples, "How *is it* that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?" <sup>17</sup> When Jesus heard *it*, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

Look, 23 years ago I suffered a heart attack.

I was blessed by God for the simple reason that many people don't survive their *first* heart attack. Too many people with heart disease never know they have a problem until it's too late. Heart disease is a silent killer, there is often no warning signs and therefore no reason to see a doctor until the attack happens—if you survive it.

It's the symptoms that let you know you're sick and in need of medical attention—without the symptoms a person can have advanced heart disease and be completely unaware of it until it takes their life.

It's not that people wouldn't see a doctor if they knew there was a problem—often times they just don't know that there is a problem until it's too late.

So, let me say it again—there is a disease that has infected the human race—it's not a physical disease it's spiritual—the disease of sin.

It's also deadly—only it doesn't just kill the body but also the soul—forever (the 'second death'). The whole human race has been infected by it and it is one hundred percent fatal—eternally fatal.

The problem is that most people today don't realize they have this deadly disease or if they do acknowledge they're sinners—they really don't think it's a serious thing (*"I know I'm not perfect, but I still think I'm good enough to get into heaven"*).

So, they ignore the warning signs and don't seek help from Jesus, the Great Physician. This is why Paul starts with the *bad* news—that mankind has been infected with a fatal (eternally fatal) disease called sin—before giving us the *good* news.

**The good news** (The Gospel) is that there is a cure for the disease of sin—but one only cure—the precious blood of Jesus Christ!

Paul lays out the bad news in Chapter 1:18 through 3:20—before giving us the good news in Romans 3:21 through 5:21—so first the bad news:

**Romans 1:18 (NKJV)**

<sup>18</sup> **For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.**

First of all, to understand the '**wrath of God**' from a biblical standpoint—we need to understand that Paul is talking about *divine* wrath, *God's* anger—which is not the same as *human* wrath or human anger. Don't ever look at God's anger when He punishes sin and accuse Him of doing something unrighteous.

➤ Even when God is angry, it is always the right response of His absolute holiness and justice.

A big part of the problem in understanding God's anger is in trying to understand it by imposing *our* concept of anger on God—but again, His anger is not like human anger or wrath.

There are two main words for '**wrath**' in the NT—the Greek words *thumos* and *orge*.

**Thumos** is a red-hot explosive anger—it comes from a root that means, "*to rush along fiercely*." This relates to the kind of anger we exhibit when we fly off the handle or '*blow our cork*.' We get our English words '*thermometer*' and '*thermonuclear*' from this Greek word.

**Orge** is the slow building of God's anger against sin (sometimes over centuries of time)—like the pressure building in a volcano.

The Greek word for '**wrath**' that Paul used in verse 18 is the word '**orge**'—a word that literally means "*to grow ripe for something*."

In using the word *orge* Paul is telling us that God's wrath or anger towards sin isn't something that is a result of Him '*flying off the handle*' as if He was some kind of '*Divine hot head*' who throws a giant temper-tantrum and wipes out sinners.

No, He has been patiently restraining His anger over the centuries—why?

Well, Peter tells us why:

## **2 Peter 3:9 (NKJV)**

<sup>9</sup> The Lord is not slack concerning His promise [of coming judgment], as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

In one sense, God's anger towards sin has been building ever since He brought the first worldwide judgment on the human race—the Flood.

The second and final worldwide judgment is coming (has been coming for a long time)—a judgment that is recorded in Revelation Chapters 6-19—we call it the Tribulation Period.

But listen, the wrath of God that Paul speaks of in Romans 1:18—is more than just the wrath that is going to be poured out on the wicked during the Great Tribulation Period or on the Day of Judgment (Revelation 20:11-15).

Because here Paul uses a *present* rather than a *future* tense verb—**“The wrath of God is revealed” or “is being revealed...”** not **“will be revealed.”**

In other words, Paul is telling us that the wrath of God has been revealed many times from heaven in the past—and continues to be revealed in the present:

- *It was revealed in the Flood*
- *When God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah*
- *At Mt. Sinai when 3000 perished for worshipping the golden calf*
- *It was revealed when God destroyed Nadab and Abihu for offering God profane fire*
- *It was revealed in the captivity of the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah*
- *It was revealed when Jesus cleansed the Temple*
- *It was revealed when Annanias and Saphira lied to God and He struck them dead*

It continues to be revealed upon America (a nation that has turned its back on God) in the chaos, corruption, confusion, and in the decline we are seeing happening before our eyes.

The same was true when Israel turned its back on God and He revealed His judgment upon them:

## **Isaiah 3:4–5, 8-9 (NLT)**

<sup>4</sup> I will make boys their leaders, and toddlers their rulers. <sup>5</sup> People will oppress each other— man against man, neighbor against neighbor. Young people will insult their elders, and vulgar people will sneer at the honorable... <sup>8</sup> For Jerusalem will stumble, and Judah will fall, because they speak out against the Lord and refuse to obey him. They provoke him to his face. <sup>9</sup> The very look on their faces gives them away. They display their sin like the people of Sodom and don't even try to hide it. They are doomed! They have brought destruction upon themselves.

All throughout man's existence upon the earth, God has erected warning signs along the highway of human history warning us about God's anger toward sin.

Even though God is very gracious and often withholds His judgment against sin because He is patient and longsuffering not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. However, sometimes to show us that He still holy and righteous—a God who still hates sin and has the divine right to punish it anytime He chooses—He will make an example of some like He did with Annanias and Saphira.

When people read that story in Acts 5 they often want to find fault with God—*“Why did God kill them? Why did they have to die for something so minor as lying to God?”* First of all, the question itself betrays a profound misunderstanding when it comes to sin—that there are minor sins that should be ‘no big deal’ to God.

**Revelation 21:8 (NKJV)**

<sup>8</sup> But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”

Folks, when it comes to Annanias and Saphire the real question is *“Not why did they have to die?”*—and real question is *“Why does God let the rest of us live!?”*

And yet, whatever you think of God punishing sin—know that He took His own ‘medicine.’ Look at the cross where a holy God who hates sin yet loves sinners became a Man and took His own punishment so that we could be spared the judgment we deserved and be adopted into God’s family to live with Him forever in His Kingdom.

➔ **LISTEN:** Story of chieftain in South or Central America whose mother was stealing chickens from the tribal community. (Isaiah 53:5-6)

Without preaching the *wrath* of God—you diminish the love of God. This wrath is revealed against—**“All ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.” (verse 18)**

The first denotes not having a right relationship with God—the second not having a right relationship with your fellow man.

What’s in view here are the 2-tables (tablets) of the Law (10 Commandments. LISTEN:)

You say, *“Why is God so angry with these people. Why does His wrath burn so hot against them—maybe they don’t know any better?”*

**Romans 1:18 (NKJV)**

<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

This opens up the entire next section in Chapter 1 from verses 19 through 32—and leads to the conclusion of Paul in Chapter 2, verse 1—**“Therefore you are inexcusable, O man...”**

The word ‘**suppress**’ comes from a Greek word that refers to a helmsman using a rudder to steer a ship against the current. In other words, the truth of God is like a current that should naturally carry us along in the direction towards God and away from sin.

But ungodly people are determined to hold the rudder of their lives against the current (the undeniable evidence of God’s existence) and steer in the opposite direction away from God and toward sin.

The idea being that even unbelievers have God's laws written in their hearts—which is why they have to exert pressure and will-power to *suppress* what they know is right to live unrighteously:

**Romans 2:14–16 (NKJV)**

<sup>14</sup> for when Gentiles [unbelievers], who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, <sup>15</sup> who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their* thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*) <sup>16</sup> in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.

As a pastor, one of the questions I have been asked from time to time is: “*What about the poor native in Africa or the Aborigine in the outback of Australia who has never heard about Jesus Christ. Is it fair that God sends them to hell?*”

The following section in Romans answers that question—

**Romans 1:19–20 (NKJV)**

<sup>19</sup> because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them. <sup>20</sup> For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.

This is called “*natural*” or “*general*” revelation—which is God’s disclosure of Himself in creation:

**Psalms 19:1–3 (NKJV)**

<sup>1</sup> The heavens [universe] declare the glory of God; And the firmament [sky] shows His handiwork. <sup>2</sup> Day unto day utters speech, And night unto night reveals knowledge. <sup>3</sup> *There is* no speech nor language *Where* their voice is not heard.

Now this is important because Christianity claims to be a revealed truth.

A *revelation* is something that has been made known to us by God—something we could not know apart from God revealing it to us.

When we talk about revelations from God to us there are 2 kinds: 1) Natural; and 2) Special.

- *Natural* revelation is God’s revelation of Himself in creation (Psalm 19:1-6).
- *Special* revelation is God’s revelation of Himself in Scripture.

*Natural* revelation gives us knowledge about God in general (He exists, He is powerful, He loves beauty and color etc.). Whereas with *special* revelation God gets ‘*up-close and personal*’ with us by introducing Himself to us, telling us His name, what He loves and what He hates, how we can know Him personally etc.).

These are things that *natural* revelation (things found in creation) can’t tell us about Him.

Here in Romans 1:19-20 Paul isn’t dealing with *special* revelation—he’s talking about natural revelation.

He is telling us that although natural revelation is incomplete in its revelation of God—it nevertheless is such a clear revelation of God’s existence that anyone who looks at the creation and rejects the existence of God is without excuse and God will hold them accountable on the Day of Judgment.

Once again, a revelation is something that is made known to us by God—it is something that would be impossible for us to know through our own human logic or intelligence or normal thought processes—it is knowledge that comes through divine input.

The Bible says that God is Spirit—spirits live in the supernatural realm—but can interact with those in the natural (physical) realm. Whereas human beings live in the physical realm but cannot interact with spirit-beings in the supernatural realm—in other words, we who are physical are *locked* in or trapped in the physical realm.

Because man is physical and God is Spirit there is no way a physical human being trapped in a ‘box’ we call the 4-dimensional physical universe, can—‘*poke a hole in the box*’ climb out and find God—no matter how long you look at your bellybutton and say ‘ooommmhh’!

Now there are many people in the occult who use techniques like: visualization, Transcendental Meditation, Tarot cards, Ouija boards and other techniques to interact with the spirit realm.

The Bible calls these practices ‘*divination*’ and condemns and forbids them—*why*?

Because God knows that the devil and his demons use these things to deceive people into thinking they are crossing the barrier that separates the natural realm from the supernatural—but in reality it is nothing more than the devil deceiving them into thinking that’s what is going on so he can feed them false doctrine (lies) that will, if embraced, destroy them in hell forever.

No matter how sincere a person is and how hard they try they are incapable of reaching beyond the boundaries of the physical, natural realm they find themselves trapped in—and therefore are incapable of knowing or understanding anything about the *supernatural* God.

Many centuries ago Job asked the rhetorical question—“*Can a man by searching find God?*” And the answer of course is—NO!

As one pastor said,

*“We can’t expect the bug in the bottle to understand the little boy that put it there anymore than we can expect the natural man with his natural capacities to understand the supernatural God—unless that God chose to condescend and reveal Himself to man.”*

Of course, God did this by giving to us 2 forms of revelation about Himself—natural revelation (the creation) and special revelation (the Bible).

However, as we said a moment ago—here in Romans 1:19-20 Paul is dealing with the knowledge of God that comes through natural revelation (the creation)—which we will continue to look at next time.

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